



A COLLECTION OF
PRIDE & PREJUDICE HOLIDAY ROMANCES

A
SEASON
OF
Love

SOPHIA GREY

A Season of Love

A Collection of Pride & Prejudice Holiday Variations

Sophia Grey

Blue Flowers Press

Copyright © 2021 by Blue Flowers Press

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Contents

An Unexpected Joy

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14

The Trouble with Lords

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Upon a Winter's Star

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Also from Sophia Grey

An Unexpected Joy

A Pride and Prejudice Holiday Variation

In the halls of Longbourn, nestled in the Hertfordshire countryside, Elizabeth Bennet's nineteenth birthday had passed without much excitement.

Much the same could be said about her twentieth year. Her mother's expectations ebbed and flowed like water, and the distraction of having the youngest Bennet girls out in society had relieved some of the pressure from Elizabeth's shoulders, but had also added several other pressing problems to her mind.

As her one and twentieth birthday approached and passed in the same manner, it would be fair to say that Elizabeth had begun to look upon her life in a somewhat different manner.

"Lizzy you have been staring out that window for almost two hours, whatever is the matter?" Jane asked as she came into the library where Elizabeth had sought some solace from the shrieking of her younger sisters as they examined the contents of their mother's ribbon box in the parlor. Jane poured herself a cup of tea, and then made a face as she lifted the cup to her lips. "Your tea has gone cold. This is very unlike you. Really, you must tell me what is on your mind."

Jane set down the disappointing cup and took a seat opposite her sister.

"I am sorry, I had forgotten it," Elizabeth apologized. She sighed heavily and closed the unread book in her lap. "I realize that this conversation is one that has been held in our presence for

many years, but do you ever wonder if Mama is right?"

Jane's eyebrow rose slightly. "Whatever could you agree with Mama upon? Shall I have Mrs. Hill call Dr. Larkinson to check on your health?"

Elizabeth grimaced and shook her head. "I am very serious, Jane," she said. "As much as I am reluctant to admit it, I have begun to wonder if there is, indeed, any happiness out there for me."

"Lizzy, you cannot say such things," Jane said kindly.

"We attend every assembly, accept the offers from almost every officer to dance... You are a charming dancer, and an accomplished artist. And I... well, I shall have to be content with playing the pianoforte very ill and singing off-key..."

"Lizzy—"

"Jane, I begin to worry that I have been waiting for that very deepest love for *far* too long," she lamented. "I begin to worry that it is a dream for silly girls and that I should turn my sights toward someone more... suitable."

"Suitable?"

Elizabeth sighed once more. "Perhaps suitable is the wrong word—"

"Lizzy, I did not know that you have been thinking of this so intensely. Surely, Miss Kennedy's engagement would not be the cause of this..."

Elizabeth shook her head, unwilling to admit that it was, indeed, part of it. Violet Kennedy had been a new addition to their friendship circle through an introduction by Charlotte Lucas. Like Charlotte, Violet was older than Jane and herself, five and twenty with a middling income and no family to speak of except for an ailing mother who spent much of her time in bed.

It might not have been her intention, but within a few months of her coming to Hertfordshire, Violet Kennedy had received no less than three marriage proposals from officers and Meryton gentlemen, and finally accepted the proposal of Mr. Anderson

Brook, the eldest son of Meryton's most prominent barrister.

In public, Mrs. Bennet was overjoyed with the news and had been one of the first to congratulate Miss Kennedy on her engagement... But in private company she complained that a young woman who entertained so many proposals must have been spreading her affections and attention in too many directions to be taken seriously.

Elizabeth knew that this was not the case, Violet Kennedy was a shy young woman who did not seem the sort to engage in activities that would bring question upon her honor—but Mrs. Bennet could decipher no other reason to why this newcomer would be preferred over her own daughters.

"No, I do not believe so," Elizabeth replied. She did not often lie to her sister, but this time she was not sure that she wanted Jane's sympathies, or to remind her sister that she was also of an age where she should have been married and a mistress of her own household. She knew how deeply to heart Jane took their mother's admonishments about engagements and good matches, and Elizabeth did not want to add to the melancholy her sister already carried as a result. "I just... I believe I need a change of scenery. Spring is coming, and this has been such a long winter."

Jane nodded her agreement. "It was terribly cold, but the Forster's Christmas ball was very exciting, especially with Miss Kennedy's engagement following so soon after." Jane sighed and looked down at her hands which were clasped tightly in her lap. "I confess that I have often dreamed of a Christmas engagement and a winter wedding..."

"I believe you shall have all of that, Jane," Elizabeth said with a smile. "But, as Christmas has already passed and spring is well and truly taking hold, perhaps we should set our sights a little farther afield. Do you recall that our aunt invited us for a tour of the north country by carriage some months ago?"

"I do," Jane said. "But it was November, and entirely too cold to think of such things!"

“Of course, it would have been ridiculous to travel in such a season. But now that the snows are melting and the trees have begun to flower, it should be a perfect time to venture out into the world.”

Jane did not look convinced and Elizabeth set her book upon the table beside her. “What reason do we have to stay in Hertfordshire another moment? Is there any pressing engagement that might keep you here?” Elizabeth’s tone was gently teasing, but she sensed that Jane was not in the mood for such things.

“I have promised Violet that I will assist in writing out her wedding invitations. The wedding has been set for early June, and I should not like to go back on my word... And the annual Regimental Ball will be held very soon as well—you should not like to miss that, Lizzy, surely. All of the new officers will be in attendance, and it is always so exciting.”

“Kitty and Lydia find such things exciting,” Elizabeth said with a wry smile. “I confess that I have somewhat cooled in my ardor for officers. I have found that many of them are only interesting when they are dressed in their fine red coats. If I am to have a husband, I would have one that I will find interesting long after his usefulness to His Majesty has waned.”

“You are impossible,” Jane laughed.

“It seems as though I am,” Elizabeth agreed. “And if I am to be so, I shall be all the more grateful to find a gentleman who is able to overlook such things.”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “But not an officer...”

“I should think not,” Elizabeth laughed. “Leave Kitty and Lydia to their affection for bright buttons and shining swords, I shall seek my greatest love elsewhere.”

“In the north country, perhaps?” Jane asked.

“One can never tell,” Elizabeth said brightly. “Come with me, Jane, perhaps you will find some clarity as well.”

“I think not,” Jane said. “With you away, Mama will want me here more than ever, and I have made my promises to Violet and

Charlotte.”

“I understand, but I do wish you would reconsider. Please give my apologies to Violet and Charlotte, but I am certain that they will not miss me.”

“I shall miss you,” Jane said with a smile. She reached out and squeezed Elizabeth’s hand. “I do hope that some time away from Longbourn will see you to better spirits, Lizzy.”

“As do I,” she agreed.

Another screech echoed down the hall and Jane rose from her seat with a grimace upon her lovely face. “I shall see to our sisters, no doubt they have chased Mama away to her rooms with their arguments.”

“I shall not abandon you to face this alone!” Elizabeth cried dramatically as she jumped up from the couch. Jane’s answering laugh was enough reward for Elizabeth, and they rushed out of the room together to calm their younger sisters’ quarrel.

Elizabeth’s letter to Mrs. Gardiner had been unexpectedly well received, and not ten days later, Elizabeth was on her way to London to prepare for the journey north. Mrs. Gardiner had written to say that they would be staying with the Elliott family on a small estate in Derbyshire—a goodly location from which to visit some of the larger estates and see the best parts of the lake country.

“Are you certain that I cannot tempt you into coming with me?” Elizabeth asked Jane on the morning of her departure.

“No, indeed, though I must admit that I am sorely tempted. I can only imagine how lovely and green everything will be on your journey.”

Elizabeth embraced her sister tightly and kissed her cheek. “See that you do not fall desperately in love with a wealthy gentleman

while I am away, for I shall be inconsolable if I am not here to see your love blossom like the apple trees!"

Jane shook her head, but her cheeks grew rosy and she laughed at her sister's dramatics. "I will give your apologies to Violet, but Mama may not forgive you for leaving so close to the Regimental Ball."

"I shall have to live with her disappointment," Elizabeth sighed. "I have left my best gloves for you, and some satin slippers for Kitty if she complains that she has nothing to borrow... but I have taken the pale pink and dove gray velvet ribbons Lydia had her eyes on. If she comes looking for them, you must break her heart gently."

"I will do my best to fulfill your wishes," Jane said with a smile.

"Lizzy! The carriage!"

Kitty's shout echoed up the stairs to their bedchamber and Jane helped Elizabeth to carry her valise down to the foyer where the family waited to bid her goodbye.

Kitty gripped Elizabeth's waist in a tight embrace as soon as she stepped off the stairs. "Oh, Lizzy, how terrible it is that you will be away for the Regimental Ball!" she lamented.

"She needn't worry," Lydia laughed. "I shall dance with every officer and they will not even notice that there is one less Bennet sister upon the dance floor!"

Elizabeth reached out and pinched her youngest sister's cheek. "See that you do," she said with a smile. Lydia pushed her hand away and stepped closer to throw her arms around Elizabeth's neck.

"We shall miss you!" she cried and Kitty echoed the sentiment loudly. Mary leaned against the staircase, silent and watchful as ever, and Elizabeth turned pleading eyes upon Jane who came to rescue her from the tangle of arms and giggling sisters.

Mrs. Bennet dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. "I have written a letter to your aunt to tell her what an imposition this is

upon us,” she moaned. “Jane will be busy with Violet Kennedy and her preposterous wedding cards. Such nerve to ask for your sister’s help...”

“Mama, I am happy to give it,” Jane sighed as she embraced Elizabeth tightly. “Perhaps Lizzy will meet a wealthy gentleman in want of a wife while she is away in Derbyshire...”

“I suppose I cannot discount such a thing,” Mrs. Bennet grumbled, but Elizabeth could see a small smile upon her mother’s lips and wondered if there was something else afoot. Mrs. Bennet was notorious for her schemes to put her daughters in front of eligible bachelors and Elizabeth did not trust that she had somehow escaped such a thing even now.

Mr. Bennet was out in the courtyard to meet the carriage as it came up the drive, and Elizabeth kissed her sisters quickly once more.

“Do behave yourselves while I am away,” she whispered to Lydia before placing a kiss upon her mother’s proffered cheek.

“We shall *try*,” Kitty said while Lydia laughed at her elder sister’s stern expression.

Jane looped her arm through Elizabeth’s and led her outside to the waiting carriage while Kitty and Lydia struggled to carry her valise.

“You shall be very much missed,” Mr. Bennet said simply as he opened the carriage door.

“Thank you, Papa, I shall be in good hands with my aunt and uncle. I shall write when I can.”

“See that you do,” Mr. Bennet replied and smiled as Elizabeth kissed his cheek and then climbed up into the carriage.

“Do give my best to Mrs. Elliott,” Mrs. Bennett called from the doorway. She had a wide smile upon her face and waved her handkerchief at the carriage. Elizabeth nodded her agreement, though she could not understand her mother’s sudden enthusiasm for her departure when only a moment ago she had been entirely bitter.

Mr. Bennet closed the carriage door and smiled up at her. No doubt he wished that he, too, could be away from Longbourn and fishing with Mr. Gardiner instead of staying in Hertfordshire to meet with the new officers who would surely come to Longbourn to speak to Kitty and Lydia after the Regimental Ball. There were, none of them, serious young men, but it would not do for him to be absent.

As the carriage rolled away, Elizabeth waved to her family and then settled back against the seat cushions. The journey to London would be the least of her troubles, for there was a much longer carriage ride ahead to bring them to Derbyshire and Mr. and Mrs. Elliott's small estate.

She peered out the carriage window to see Longbourn disappearing behind her, and storm clouds gathering overhead. Elizabeth frowned and hoped desperately that the sudden turn in the weather would not hamper their journey north—though, perhaps some time London would be enough to chase away her melancholy, if only for a little while.

Unfortunately for Elizabeth, as soon as she had departed

Longbourn it seemed as though Mother Nature had not forgotten her winter malevolence and her luck did not change upon her arrival in London.

“I fear we shall have to leave sooner than later,” Mrs. Gardiner mused as she looked out at the rain-slick streets from the parlor window.

“It will pass soon enough, my dear,” Mr. Gardiner said reassuringly.

To be sure that they were not overly delayed, a carriage was ordered for early the next morning, and Elizabeth spent a restless night listening to the thunder as it rumbled overhead and the sound of the rain hitting the window. She pulled the blankets up higher and wished that she had been able to convince Jane to come with her. She loved her aunt and uncle and always enjoyed her time with them, but the prospect of being in a strange house with no one to truly confide in had put her on edge, and she could not quite determine why that might be.

Elizabeth was full awake and dressed before dawn, and she could hear movement in the house as she re-packed her valise and dressed her hair. There would be just enough time for tea and a light breakfast before the carriage would arrive and the journey to Derbyshire would begin.

Mrs. Gardiner was in high spirits, and Elizabeth struggled to keep up with her aunt's energy as she described the countryside and the sights they would see as they traveled north.

From the moment their carriage set out from the Gardiner's Gracechurch Street house, they were beset by torrential rains and a cold biting wind that invaded every crack of the carriage and left all three of its occupants shivering and chilled to the bone despite the heavy fur blankets that Mr. Gardiner had insisted upon packing into the carriage as a precaution. Elizabeth was grateful for their warmth, but they did not quite keep out the cold, and she shivered for countless miles as London disappeared behind them and the country began to stretch away to the horizon.

No matter the state of the weather, Mrs. Gardiner's spirits were not to be dampened in the slightest. They changed carriages and took a meal at a delightful inn and Elizabeth relished the opportunity to sit by a roaring fire and hold a bowl of hot stew. The barrage of rain seemed unending, but the pressure to reach their destination at a reasonable hour meant that they could not tarry long.

As warm as they could be under such a strict schedule, Elizabeth was bundled into the new carriage and did her best to stay as still as possible so as not to allow any cold breezes to penetrate the warm cocoon that had been created around her.

As they approached their Derbyshire destination, Elizabeth noticed that the dark clouds overhead had grown even more numerous, and a gray haze hung in the air that was more reminiscent of winter than spring.

Mrs. Gardiner, however, seemed entirely thrilled by the entire situation and paid no attention to the weather. With every mile that passed, her aunt's mood improved all the more. She exclaimed over landmarks, pointed out grand estates, and laughed at the antics of the spring lambs in the fields near the road.

As the carriage turned away from the main road to follow a narrow drive lined with tall pine trees, Mrs. Gardiner gripped her husband's hand tightly. "This will be a merry gathering, indeed," she exclaimed as the carriage pulled up in front of a house that resembled Longbourn in size, but looked much older. The front facade was faded and badly in need of repainting, but otherwise the grounds were well kept and the roses that clustered by the front door and wound their way up a stone archway were thick and looked very old indeed.

It was late in the afternoon and the gathering clouds made everything seem so much darker though the sun had not yet dipped below the horizon. Elizabeth's stomach rumbled gently at the prospect of hot food and a glass of brandy to warm her from the inside out.

"A lovely aspect, do you not agree, Lizzy?" Mr. Gardiner asked jovially. All Elizabeth could do was nod in agreement. The house was, indeed, well positioned, but Elizabeth could only think of the threateningly dark and dreary clouds overhead.

Her aunt had done her utmost to arrange this journey north and though their passage through the countryside had been long, and somewhat arduous given the unpredictability of the weather, Elizabeth was determined to enjoy her stay at Grove House.

As the carriage pulled to a stop in front of the house, there was a rumble of thunder in the distance and a heavy rain began to fall.

Elizabeth pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders as a footman rushed out of the house to assist their exit from the carriage. Two figures appeared on the doorstep and Mrs. Gardiner waved excitedly.

"You will simply *love* Grove House, Lizzy," her aunt said as they climbed down from the carriage.

"I do not doubt it for one moment," she replied warmly. As her aunt had explained it, Grove House was a small estate in which she had spent much of her childhood, and Elizabeth could see that her memories of the place were warm and loving. It was now owned

by one of Mrs. Gardiner's dearest childhood friends, and Mrs. Elliott was as eager to welcome them as her aunt was to be there.

"My goodness, you have arrived just in time!" Mrs. Elliott cried and Elizabeth chuckled as the round woman frowned briefly and reached up to brush a stray raindrop off the end of her husband's long nose. "Come inside, come inside! Supper is waiting for you and Mrs. Spencer has set some hot cider upon the stove to warm you!"

"How lovely," Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed as she stepped forward and embraced their hostess.

Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Elliott greeted each other as old friends and Elizabeth could not keep the smile from her face as she saw her aunt and uncle so happy to be away from the bustle of London. Despite her earlier reservations, Elizabeth was glad that she had accepted the long overdue invitation to see this part of the country with them.

Mrs. Elliott was a warm, welcoming woman, and her husband was a jovial fellow who was nothing close to what Elizabeth had expected from a gentleman who was master of an estate such as this.

They went into the dining room and sat down to supper almost immediately while the servants took trunks and valises up to the bedchambers that had been prepared for them.

Elizabeth sipped her warm cider and listened as the dinner conversation careened from topic to topic, never staying too long upon one or the other to grow tiresome, and Elizabeth found herself laughing more than she had in years.

As they laughed and talked together, it was easy to imagine Mrs. Elliott and her aunt as young girls playing on the grounds of Grove House together, and Elizabeth found herself missing Jane.

"You are very quiet tonight, Elizabeth," Mrs. Elliott said with a kind smile. "I do hope you are not worried about the weather. We shall be quite comfortable here, this is nothing to some of the strange weather we have experienced here is it, Thomas?"

“Certainly not,” Mr. Elliott replied. “We are well stocked with firewood and the kitchens are fit to feed an army.”

Elizabeth did feel somewhat reassured, but she was also lightly embarrassed at being caught in her distraction. “That is excellent news. But I was simply wondering how we would fill our time now that such miserable weather has arrived so suddenly. All of our plans were dependent on mild weather and walks in the country!”

Mrs. Elliott clapped her hands gaily and leaned against her husband. “I suppose I shall tell you now,” she said. “I have written to my son, George, to tell him of your arrival and we are very lucky that he has just arrived from abroad! We have just this year ordered a fine sleigh to be built in preparation for the winter months and George will be bringing a pair of fine horses he purchased in Holland with him. Grand creatures, to be sure. I daresay, he is a very entertaining young man and we shall have no shortage of stories from him!” Mrs. Elliott laughed.

Mrs. Gardiner leaned forward with interest and Elizabeth could see a hint of mischief sparkling in her gray-blue eyes. “Rose, you must refresh my memory,” she said. “How old is your George, now?”

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warming and she looked at her aunt with a warning glance. She was two-and-twenty herself, and only recently had she felt that her lack of an engagement was always lurking in the background of every conversation. It did not help matters that her mother never ceased to remind her, and anyone within earshot, of it.

“Why, he is nearly thirty,” Mrs. Elliott exclaimed brightly, as though her friend’s question had come as a complete surprise.

“And well overdue for a wife,” Mr. Elliott cut in gruffly without looking up from his plate.

Elizabeth looked down at her food and tapped her meat with her fork. Mrs. Gardiner had not warned her that any matchmaking activities would be taking place on this visit, and Elizabeth chided herself for believing that she would be able to enjoy her time away

from her mother's unceasing scheming.

"If only we had come closer to winter. A sleigh-ride through the country would be so divine," Mrs. Gardiner sighed happily. "But alas, we have naught but spring rain to keep us indoors and huddled 'round the fire."

"Indeed," Elizabeth agreed with a smile. A sleigh-ride *would* have been wonderful, and it would also have been just the thing to take her mind off the fact that there was some plotting afoot.

Perhaps George Elliott would be a handsome sort of gentleman, and from the smile upon her aunt's face Elizabeth decided that she would not mind meeting Mrs. Elliott's son. If he were short and stout, or completely unsuited to her, Mrs. Gardiner would never behave so enthusiastically. At least, that was her hope.

Elizabeth had no intention of accepting any form of engagement while she was away from Longbourn. She could make no decision about something so important without Jane's opinion. While Mrs. Bennet might have been determined to see her elder daughters married by Christmas, it was something she lamented every year—and at this rate it was very likely that her wailing would continue for several more seasons.

"If this weather continues, I daresay we will be able to indulge in some more diverting activities... tell me, Elizabeth, do you skate?" Mrs. Elliott's eyes sparkled with excitement and Elizabeth very nearly choked on her wine.

"Skating? Do you really believe that this weather will turn into something more sinister?" Elizabeth cried. It was scarcely March, and if they had been in Hertfordshire she would have been confident that the rain would only mean that the garden would emerge fresher on the other side of it.

Mr. Elliott nodded gravely. "The almanac might say differently, but it is not outside the realm of possibility—Why, we had a spate of bad weather much like this one when I was a child," Mr. Elliott said. "Very late in the season. Torrential rain and thunderstorms, and then a blast of cold air from the north—everything froze and

the snow fell upon the countryside for a week or more.” Mrs. Elliott nodded at the memory and her husband chuckled. “Why, skating on the pond in April is one of my favorite memories.”

Mrs. Elliott smiled at her husband and patted his hand gently. “I remember it well,” she said with an indulgent smile. “Florence and I were watching from the library with the other children while the older boys skated on the pond. Thomas fell so many times! When the Master finally dragged him inside and set him in front of the fire I daresay there was not a dry spot on him!”

Mr. Elliott harrumphed into his wine as Mrs. Elliott and Mrs. Gardiner erupted into laughter. Elizabeth was overwhelmed with all of the information that had been heaped upon her, and her worry that the storm outside would transform into a winter gale was more pressing than any other emotion she might have felt. She blinked at her aunt in confusion, not certain which point she wanted to ask questions about first.

“Do not look so bewildered, Lizzy,” Mrs. Gardiner said kindly. “Mr. Elliott’s mother was very fond of children and as he was their only child, she was very agreeable to hosting the children from nearby estates in Grove House’s nursery and library for their studies. I spent many a happy year here.”

“It is true,” Mrs. Elliott said. “My family home is not far from here, but my mother was very sickly and she sent me to live here at Grove House for the benefit of my health and my education. When my mother died, I came to stay here until I was of an age that I could consider making a good marriage—”

“And a good marriage it is,” Mr. Elliott grumbled with a good-natured smile before he turned his attention to Elizabeth. “If the storm does turn into something a little nastier, perhaps you will be able to skate! Do you skate, Miss Elizabeth?”

“I—” Elizabeth did not know how to answer his question. She had, but it had been so long ago that she barely remembered.

“Three generations of Elliott children have enjoyed skating upon that pond,” Mr. Elliott said proudly.

“I hope, one day, that a fourth generation will have their chance to do the same.” Mrs. Elliott’s voice was wistful, but Elizabeth could not mistake the woman’s meaning—she seemed to expect that day would come sooner than later.

Elizabeth sipped her wine and wished more than ever that she had brought Jane along with her to at least share in her awkward misery and wondered if Mrs. Elliott was this opportunistic with all of her guests. Mr. Elliott drained his wine glass and pushed away his plate.

“Come now, Gardiner, let us leave these ladies to their plotting. I have some fine brandy in my library that I would very much like to share with you.”

Mr. Gardiner smiled and dabbed his mouth with his napkin before rising from his chair. “An excellent idea, my friend.” He leaned down to place a kiss upon his wife’s cheek before following Mr. Elliott from the dining room.

Mrs. Elliott sighed happily as she watched the gentlemen leave, and Elizabeth could almost imagine what the Elliott’s must have been like in the early days of their courtship. Like her aunt and uncle they still seemed very much in love and Elizabeth could not help but hope the same happiness waited somewhere in her future.

“Since the gentlemen have left us, shall we go to the drawing room to play cards? I am in the mood for piquet tonight! I will have Mrs. Spencer bring up some sherry.”

Mrs. Elliott’s eyes sparkled and Elizabeth had a feeling that as soon as the cards were dealt that conversation would turn toward the *many* accomplishments of one Mr. George Elliott, and Elizabeth found that she had no stomach for it.

Elizabeth followed her aunt and Mrs. Elliott to the corridor, but paused at the staircase instead of walking to the drawing room with them.

“If you will pardon me, Mrs. Elliott, I think should like to go to bed,” Elizabeth said apologetically. “I am a very poor Piquet

player, and would be ill company tonight.”

“Are you quite well, Lizzy?” Mrs. Gardiner’s voice was full of concern and Elizabeth turned a smile in her aunt’s direction.

“Of course,” she replied. “I am just tired from our journey. It is nothing that a good night’s sleep and a warm fire won’t cure.”

“Be sure to ring for the maid if you find that your room is not warm enough,” Mrs. Elliott said. “We have a new girl from Sheffield, and I daresay she cannot tell the difference between a button and a needle, but she does as she is told well enough.”

Elizabeth thanked her hostess and left her aunt and Mrs. Elliott to spend the remainder of their evening in the drawing room to laugh and reminisce over their cards.

She climbed the stairs to the second floor and the bedchamber she had been given for their stay and sighed heavily as she leaned against the doorframe and looked into the room. According to Mrs. Elliott, the room had belonged to her eldest daughter, Flora, before she had married and moved away to her husband’s estate in Kent. It was still very much a young woman’s room, and Elizabeth knew that she would be quite comfortable.

The lanterns were lit and a fire crackled in the hearth making the room pleasantly warm against the chill she still felt in her bones. Elizabeth closed the door behind her and as the latch *clicked* she felt her exhaustion weigh heavily upon her. She really *was* tired, but whether it truly was from the journey or from the expectation she felt in the house at the merest mention of Mr. George Elliott, she could not say.

Her valise had been set upon the bed, and as she pulled out the dresses she had packed for the journey she sighed as she realized that she had not packed anything even remotely warm enough for the weather that had settled over the countryside.

When they had arrived earlier in the day, Mrs. Elliott made

much of the fact that Elizabeth was of a similar size to her dear Flora, and had also promised to pull some warmer clothing out of storage for her. Mr. and Mrs. Elliott both seemed convinced that this spring storm would take a turn for the worst, and Elizabeth hoped that it would not be the case. While she was grateful for her hostess' kindness, she also wished that it were not necessary—she did not want to be the cause of a fuss of any kind.

Elizabeth leaned against the window frame and peered out into the darkness. She could see nothing, but the sound of thunder had faded away... but so had the sound of the rain. She clutched her shawl tightly, turned the window latch and pushed the window open. Her breath fogged in the cold air as she exclaimed in surprise. A few fat snowflakes floated into the room and Elizabeth shut the window tightly.

“Impossible!” she said as she watched it melt upon the window sill.

If such weather had descended upon Longbourn, Elizabeth knew that she would hear the familiar sound of Lydia clamoring for hot cider and in the very same breath demanding an ill-advised walk to town so she could count the icicles on the edges of the buildings. There would be no arguing with her, and early the next morning they would set off for Meryton and return home red-cheeked and shivering from the cold and it would take ages for any kind of warmth to settle back into her bones.

Elizabeth shivered at the memory of such outings and pulled a shawl around her shoulders. While her younger sisters were enamored of the winter weather, Elizabeth was perfectly happy to be indoors in front of a crackling fire with a book and wishing for spring.

With a heavy sigh, Elizabeth settled herself at the vanity and began to prepare for bed. It was early yet, but the prospect of a good night's sleep was too intoxicating to avoid.

It would be of no use to write Jane a letter, if the snow settled in as the Elliott's were convinced that it would, there would be no

chance of having it delivered for some time. Perhaps in the morning she would be able to shake off the feeling of foreboding and melancholy that threatened to dampen her spirits. Tomorrow would bring a whole host of new challenges, and in the coming days she would have to face the promised arrival of Mr. George Elliott.

Elizabeth sighed heavily and braided her hair as she stared at her reflection in the polished mirror. “Jane would know what to do,” she said aloud.

Jane. Sweet, biddable Jane. She would be more likely as not do as their mother wished and would entertain the gentleman no matter how dull he was. She might even smile as he made a proposal of marriage—for that was surely what Mrs. Elliott had intended by inviting him here. There would be no other reason for him to abandon whatever jolly business he was attending in London or elsewhere to return to the country at his mother’s bidding. Buying horses in Holland... how was such a thing even possible? Elizabeth shook her head and let out a frustrated breath.

Even now she could imagine that Mrs. Elliott would be speaking to Mrs. Gardiner in hushed tones about Elizabeth’s accomplishments, her prospects, and the sorry state of her annual income. She would also, no doubt, enquire as to whether any other gentleman had made an offer of marriage.

The answer would be no, of course and Elizabeth sighed heavily as she imagined the sympathetic expression that would cross Mrs. Elliott’s face at Mrs. Gardiner’s reply.

Had she been to many balls and masques in Hertfordshire?

Yes, at every opportunity.

Was she well thought of in the society she kept?

Were her family and acquaintances above reproach?

But herein was the problem.

Mrs. Bennet, though well liked in certain circles, had a *direct* manner of speaking that had been the cause of some

embarrassment in the past which Elizabeth was not entirely certain had been smoothed over by her father's efforts and explanations.

Perhaps if his mother could see her way to navigate through Mrs. Bennet's nerves and exclamations, Mr. George Elliott would be able to overlook such things as well. Elizabeth knew that her mother always meant well, though she did not always realize what effect her words had on those around her.

Elizabeth set her brush down and her gaze wandered back to the window. Regardless of the weather or how she was feeling, they had intended to stay at Grove House for several weeks. As much as she disliked having her future dictated to her, perhaps there would be no harm in passing the time in such a way. Elizabeth was not even certain if such a thing would come to pass. So often she spent in inordinate amount of time imagining conversations and interactions that never occurred—perhaps this was no different.

Mrs. Elliott and her aunt could be in the drawing room this very moment sipping sherry and recalling their childhood days in the country and sparing no thoughts for anything else.

It was unlikely, but she could hope.

Elizabeth tied a small length of cotton ribbon around the end of her braid and blew out the candle that sat upon the vanity. She turned down the lamps, climbed beneath the blankets, and shuddered at the chill. She remembered suddenly that she had forgotten to ring for the maid.

However, the fire crackled in the hearth, and Elizabeth snuggled deeper into the bed to try and chase away the cold. The bed warmed slowly, and Elizabeth's eyes drifted closed.

A persistent knock at the heavy wooden door woke Elizabeth

from a sound sleep, and as she sat up and rubbed at her eyes the face of an eager, red-cheeked girl appeared around the door.

"I hope I didn't wake you too suddenly, Miss Bennet, but Mrs. Elliott likes all of her guests to be up and about before the clock strikes eight."

"How thoughtful," Elizabeth mumbled as the girl entered and set a bowl of steaming wash water down on the washstand. The girl smiled and bobbed a curtsy before she went to the door again.

"Breakfast will be served at eight-thirty, Miss," she said. Elizabeth looked at the clock on the mantle. Seven. Barely enough time to wash and dress.

"Thank you," Elizabeth said. She winced as her feet hit the cold floor. "Could you bring me some tea?" she called out as the door swing closed.

The girl's face appeared again, all smiles and bright eyes. "Of course, Miss. I have to come back and re-stoke your fire anyhow... But you mustn't tell Mrs. Spencer... tea isn't to be served until breakfast is on the table."

"No. Of course," Elizabeth said. "It will be our secret."

The girl smiled and then disappeared as the door closed. Elizabeth sighed and looked down at her toes. Rules. So many different rules. Would she behave in such a manner when she was the mistress of her own household?

Elizabeth looked out the window and gasped at the brightness of the light that came through the panes. *That could only mean one thing.*

She could see her breath in the room, and it just seemed easier to dive back under the covers to hide from the chill that had settled over her.

She pulled her shawl from the back of the vanity chair and tiptoed to the window. As she had feared, the ground was blanketed in white and the snow was still falling gently. Frost patterns swirled up the window panes and Elizabeth traced her

finger over them wonderingly.

“Snow in March, how strange...”

But she could not linger at the window—she would have very little time before the eagerly smiling maid returned to stoke the fire and bring the tea she had requested, so she turned from the window and focused upon the washstand. With chattering teeth she dipped a square of linen into the steaming water and did her best to wash away her shivering and the remnants of sleep before the girl returned.

She was just pulling a thick cotton chemise over her head when the maid’s fervent knock interrupted her. Elizabeth lurched for the door and opened it just as she heard the girl fumbling at her waist for the key to the door. “Miss Bennet!” she said in surprise as the door opened. “I do apologize for the delay... Mrs. Spencer insisted that I bring a pair of Miss Flora’s woollen stockings for you. She was certain that they would fit just fine.”

The girl bustled into the room and set the small tea tray down on the vanity before laying the woollen stockings over the end of the bed.

“If you’ll pardon me for saying so, you are almost an exact match for Miss Flora in size, Miss Bennet. I believe these will serve you well.” The girl grinned at her and bent to stoke the fire and set a new log upon it when it flared to life. Elizabeth stroked her fingers over the stockings gratefully. She had truly brought nothing suitable for this unexpected weather, and the stockings would help to keep away some of the chill that shuddered through her now.

“Thank you...” she said, but as the girl straightened and curtsied quickly before she disappeared behind the door again, Elizabeth felt the need to know the maid’s name. “What should I call you?” she asked.

“Just Alice, Miss Bennet,” she replied. “I’ll return to remind you for breakfast. Mrs. Elliott doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth replied. “Thank you, Alice.”

The girl disappeared, closing the door behind her, and

Elizabeth shook her head as she remembered Mrs. Elliott's unkind observation of the girl. Alice seemed sweet enough, and eager to complete her duties, perhaps she would be able to show the girl some kindness and bolster her self-esteem just a little.

Elizabeth plucked the stockings from the end of the bed and seated herself at the vanity. She pulled the woolen stockings up over her knees and marveled at the instant warmth they provided.

Perhaps this unintended disruption of their plans would not be so disastrous after all.

The clock on the mantle chimed softly and Elizabeth let out a furious breath as she realized she would be required to present herself for breakfast in a very short amount of time. She fumbled with the stockings and then began the frantic hunt for the packet of hairpins and ribbons Jane had packed for her. This day was off to a very disjointed beginning, and Elizabeth could not shake off a feeling of unease that threatened to settle over her shoulders.

"Do not be silly," she admonished her reflection. "You will feel more yourself after breakfast."

She gave a cry of victory as she found the hairpins and ribbons and set to furiously arranging her hair into some kind of presentable style. She was just securing the final pin into her curls when Alice's knuckles rapped upon the door to summon her down to breakfast. She gave herself one final critical glance before she frowned at her reflection, jumped up from her chair and and rushed to open the door before the maid tired herself out.

"Yes, yes, thank you," Elizabeth said briskly as she closed the door behind her.

Alice blushed and jumped back from the door before dropping an awkward curtsy and rushing away down the hall to rap on another door.

As she walked to the stairs, Elizabeth could see the snow still falling outside the high window at the end of the hallway and she shook her head and pulled her shawl around her shoulders. "A

most unreasonable spring,” she muttered as she descended the stairs toward the warmth of the main floor of the house.

Elizabeth was not the first to arrive at the breakfast table,

and she was greeted brightly by Mrs. Gardiner who seemed to have been awake for hours.

“I do hope that you were able to sleep, Lizzy,” her aunt said with a smile. “I know how it can be to spend the night in a strange bed when you are traveling.”

“Oh, no, I was quite comfortable,” Elizabeth replied truthfully. “I must remember to thank Mrs. Elliott for the loan of Miss Elliott’s woollen stockings, I had not expected—” she looked out the window at the snow-covered gardens and the field beyond. “This!”

Mrs. Gardiner laughed and poured her niece a cup of tea. “I have seen snow much later in the year here,” she said. “When I was a girl it was not uncommon to have a snowfall in early May!”

“Astounding,” Elizabeth said. “And what did you do?”

“We had a marvelous time,” Mrs. Elliott said from the doorway. “I am very glad to see you looking so well, Miss Elizabeth,” she said.

“I thank you, the bed was very comfortable, and I am exceedingly grateful for the woollen stockings that were sent up this morning. I am very warm, indeed. I would have been miserable without them!”

“As I said, Florence,” Mrs. Elliott said with a broad smile. “She is just my dear Flora’s size.”

“Indeed, you have an eye for sizing,” Mrs. Gardiner agreed as

her friend came into the room and took a seat at the breakfast table.

Mrs. Elliott looked pleased with herself. "I have ordered some of Flora's things to be brought out of their storage—they will need to be re-hemmed, I should think, but an easy task to while away some time while you are here at Grove House."

Elizabeth smiled and took her seat at the table across from their hostess. "You are too kind, really," Elizabeth said. "Had I known that the weather would be so unpredictable, I would have been better prepared."

Mrs. Elliott chuckled warmly. "Ah, my dear, it is a hard thing to prepare for a Derbyshire spring! One day it will be balmy and sweet, and then a cold wind will blow in from the north and we all shiver in our beds. But as long as there is a warm fire and a full pantry, we will be very merry, indeed."

"Well said, Dearest," Mr. Elliott announced as he entered the room.

Mr. Gardiner followed close behind the other gentleman and kissed his wife's proffered cheek before greeting Elizabeth in his usual cheerful manner.

"An excellent day, do you not agree, Lizzy?" he asked as he took the dark coffee that Mrs. Gardiner had poured for him.

"Excellent for a January day, Uncle," she replied. "I am not so certain of how to feel about such weather in March!"

"Nonsense," Mrs. Elliott scolded her with a smile. "Why, if this cold remains, we might be able to partake of that sleigh-ride and perhaps even skating!"

Elizabeth was not certain that either of those activities would be preferable to staying indoors in front of the fire with a book in her hand, but she could not argue with the enthusiasm of her hosts, and the expectation upon her aunt's face—this visit was certainly important to Mrs. Gardiner, and Elizabeth did not want to be the cause of any sour notes to break up the harmony of their stay in Derbyshire.

“But the most exciting news is yet to arrive,” Mrs. Elliott said excitedly. “My dear George is on his way from London today—”

“I believe the letter said that he had already departed, my dear,” Mr. Elliott corrected his wife gently. “George should be arriving tomorrow afternoon with the horses.”

“Even in this weather?” Elizabeth exclaimed. She had not yet determined if she had any opinion on Mr. George Elliott, but being angry at the presumption of his arrival would not help anything. It would not be a hardship to be kind to the young man.

“Wonderful,” Mrs. Elliott beamed. “We shall be a very merry party, indeed!”

“Indeed,” Mrs. Gardiner agreed happily.

Over scones with homemade preserves from one of Mr. Elliott’s tenant farms, tea and coffee, Elizabeth learned more about Grove House and her aunt’s childhood at the estate. Her uncle had spent his childhood just outside London with Elizabeth’s mother and her aunt, Mrs. Phillips—their upbringing had been very simple in comparison but Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were still very well suited to each other despite their differences.

Mrs. Elliott was more than forthcoming with information and Elizabeth sat entranced by the stories that poured from her hostess.

“Your uncle came to Grove House with his Papa one summer to speak to the elder Mr. Elliott about the purchase of some farming equipment or some other tedious thing...”

Mr. Elliott chuckled but did not interrupt his wife and Mrs. Gardiner blushed faintly as she no doubt recalled the day in question.

“I daresay, your poor uncle was stuck to my dear Florence like a burr! Impossible to remove and twice as stubborn as our mule. And so bold in speaking to her!” Mrs. Elliott laughed as Mr. Gardiner harrumphed good-naturedly into his coffee cup.

“My Thomas tried in vain to distract him with horses and the tenant farms to keep him away from us, but it was not until he

dragged the poor lovesick lad fishing at Pemberley's lake that he was able to be torn from his pining for your aunt."

"And I have not been able to drag him from the water yet!" Mrs. Gardiner declared and all around the table laughed in response. Mr. Gardiner's love of fishing bordered upon an obsession, and though he was not an accomplished angler, even after so many years, Elizabeth knew that her aunt was very accommodating to her husband's fondness for the sport and did not discourage him as some wives might.

"What is Pemberley?" Elizabeth asked. "A nearby estate?"

"Indeed it is," Mr. Elliott said. "The Darcy family have lived there for many years."

"Excellent fishing," Mr. Gardiner said with a smile but then sighed heavily and looked out the window at the falling snow. "There will be no use visiting it now."

"Aye, there will be no fishing for you on this visit, Gardiner," Mr. Elliott chuckled. "Though we might visit the estate on our sleigh ride. It has been some time since we have paid our respects."

Mr. Elliott looked down at his tea and Mrs. Elliott shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Elizabeth was curious about their reactions—had it been so long since they had visited their own neighbors? *But why?*

"What is the family like?" Elizabeth asked. It was a question of politeness only, and she was stunned to see the change in expression on Mrs. Elliott's face. "What is it? Have I said something wrong?"

"Oh, no," Mrs. Elliott said kindly. "It is just—it has been some time since we have visited Pemberley."

"Five years now, I should think," Mr. Elliott said.

Mrs. Elliott nodded sadly. "Yes. Yes, it has been five years since Rosemary died..." She looked up at Elizabeth and folded her hands upon the table. "The Darcy family have lived at Pemberley for many generations," she said. "Six years ago, the master of Pemberley, Fitzwilliam Darcy, married—the wedding was a grand

affair and I daresay the whole of Derbyshire was invited.”

“How wonderful,” Mrs. Gardiner murmured.

“It was beautiful, and the couple were so happy and well suited to each other... And you should have seen the flowers, Florence—like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Just exquisite.” Mr. Elliott cleared his throat to bring his wife’s focus back to her story. Mrs. Elliott sipped her tea distractedly as her husband shifted in his seat. “Well, it was very tragic, but the poor woman, she had a very complicated pregnancy—the doctor sent her to bedrest very early on. The child was born too soon... A girl. Small, but healthy. But the mother—”

Elizabeth covered her mouth with her hand to prevent her gasp of shocked sadness from escaping. Childbirth was dangerous, even now in an age of more competent doctors and medical procedures, and Elizabeth felt a wave of pity for this gentleman and the motherless child she had never met.

Mrs. Elliott sighed. “We visited once or twice to see the child and to offer our support to poor Mr. Darcy, but he seemed so withdrawn and melancholy. He stopped accepting our invitations to dances and even Thomas’ invitations to go riding or fishing.”

“And who cared for the child?” Mrs. Gardiner asked.

“His sister, Miss Georgiana, she was living in Ramsgate for her education, but she came home to Pemberley at once to care for the child, and her dear brother I am sure.” Mrs. Elliott seemed somewhat embarrassed that the mood of the room had been brought so low by Elizabeth’s questions and Elizabeth could not help but feel terrible for prying.

“Perhaps a visit would be welcome,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “Theodore has spoken quite often of Pemberley’s lake and the beauty of the estate...”

“But mostly of the fishing,” Mr. Elliott laughed and Mrs. Gardiner smiled wryly at his comment, which prompted more laughter from the rest of the party.

The conversation moved on to happier subjects, but Elizabeth

could not stop thinking about Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, a reclusive widower with a young daughter. How sad their days must be, and how lonely.

The snow fell steadily over Grove House for three days, blanketing the fields and the road in white and rendering the household all but immobile under silent drifts.

Elizabeth could not help but worry about the weather, especially with the way the sharp and bitter wind howled at the windows and shrieked in the chimney. In stark contrast to Elizabeth's feelings, the Elliotts and Gardiners seemed thrilled by the weather and their good spirits could not be dampened.

Mrs. Elliott fretted over the arrival of her dear George, but was easily reassured that he had only been delayed by the bad weather.

"He is such a dashing young man—I daresay it would take only the onset of the most extreme weather to keep him from our doorstep and his dear Mama!" Mrs. Elliott's proud announcement drew an indulgent smile from Mrs. Gardiner, but Elizabeth felt overwhelmed by all of this praise.

In Elizabeth's mind, George Elliott had been created as a tall, broad figure who would arrive at Grove House with a great fanfare, most likely astride one of the massive horses he had purchased abroad.

However, she also entertained the possibility that George Elliott would be the precise opposite of everything his mother described. It was too much to hope that a proud mother would actually be speaking truthfully about her children.

So frustrated was she that Elizabeth finally took her aunt aside to ask about the young man.

“Why, Lizzy,” Mrs. Gardiner said with some surprise, “I did not think you had any interest in meeting George Elliott.”

“I did not,” Elizabeth hissed quietly, “but I confess that I am entirely perplexed by the way he has been described and spoken of. Surely, one young man cannot have so much to recommend him and *still* be in want of a wife!”

“Perhaps he has not found one *suitable* to his many accomplishments,” Mrs. Gardiner said with a sly smile.

Elizabeth made a face but composed herself quickly. Her aunt was working very hard to make certain that Elizabeth had not discounted George Elliott as a possible love interest.

“I find that very hard to believe,” Elizabeth said quietly. Mrs. Elliott was watching them out of the corner of her eye as she pretended to work at her needlepoint and Elizabeth was not certain that she could entirely trust her hostess not to be eavesdropping on their conversation. Though she pretended very well to be completely engrossed in her work, Elizabeth had enough experience with similar behavior from her own dear mama.

“Are you fond of horses, Elizabeth?” Mrs. Elliott asked suddenly.

“I am not certain,” Elizabeth replied honestly, caught off guard by the question. “I have not had the opportunity to be around them very much... Longbourn has a small stable—”

“I shall have to prevail upon my darling George to introduce you to our fine riding horses. He will find a patient creature to teach you the beginner points... a young lady of accomplishment should be able to ride side-saddle, should she not, Florence?”

Mrs. Elliott looked to Mrs. Gardiner for her approval, and Elizabeth’s aunt stammered some sort of reply, but Elizabeth was not listening. The sound of shouts from outside the house drew her attention to the parlor window and she went over to see what the commotion was all about followed closely by her aunt.

“What is it, Florence?” Mrs. Elliott called out. “I cannot put this aside—”

“You may very well have to,” Mrs. Gardiner laughed.

Elizabeth stared out the window incredulously. George Elliott’s arrival at Grove House was exactly how she had scornfully pictured it. The snow fell lightly, stark white against the gray skies. The dark green of the pine trees was almost black in the muted light and George Elliott, astride a black horse larger than any Elizabeth had ever seen and leading another behind, had just urged the massive beasts into a canter as they turned into the drive. He looked tall and imposing, not at all dwarfed by the horse’s size. He was finely dressed, and appeared no worse for wear for having ridden in such weather.

Elizabeth was pushed aside by Mrs. Elliott as she rushed to the window. “Oh! Oh, my darling boy!” she exclaimed. “See how fine he looks, Florence...”

“Indeed,” Mrs. Gardiner agreed, “and the horses look well.”

Mr. Elliott and Mr. Gardiner rushed out of the house to meet the new arrival, and Elizabeth watched as the young man jumped down from the great horse’s back to land gracefully in the snow. He patted the creature’s dark neck and handed the reins to a footman who ran forward to assist him.

“They are very fine...” But Mrs. Elliott only had eyes for her son. “What a marvellous thing he has done coming all that distance.” She looped her arm through Elizabeth’s and pulled her away from the window. “Come... Come now, Elizabeth, I am certain that George will be very glad to meet you.”

“Surely, he will want to recover from his journey first,” Elizabeth protested weakly.

Mrs. Elliott, however, was determined. “Nonsense!” she said as she pulled Elizabeth along. Elizabeth had to move quickly to keep up with her hostess and they came into the foyer just as the gentlemen came in from the snow. The open door allowed the sharp wind and a fair amount of snow to enter with them, and Mrs. Elliott shrieked with joy to see her son’s red-cheeked face.

He was not as tall as Elizabeth had first guessed, but both he

and his father towered over her without much trouble. His smile was broad and natural, as though he were not accustomed to having any other expression upon his face. Blue eyes were complimented most purposefully by his cobalt blue jacket which was finely tailored across his broad shoulders.

“Mama,” he exclaimed as he swept Mrs. Elliott up into his arms. He swung her around the foyer as she shrieked and laughed merrily. It was a difficult thing to keep the smile from her own face, and Elizabeth was shocked to see that Mr. George Elliott’s eyes were upon her as he set his mother on her feet once more.

He greeted Mrs Gardiner first with a kiss upon her cheek and Elizabeth was stunned to see a pink blush upon her aunt’s cheek. He was dashing, to be sure, but Elizabeth refused to be taken in by such a display. The drama of his arrival had been entirely unnecessary.

“Now, George, this is the young lady I wrote to you about,” Mrs. Elliott said and Elizabeth’s stomach twisted uncomfortably. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet, I am very pleased to introduce my son.”

George Elliott bowed smartly and turned his smile upon Elizabeth. His blue eyes sparkled with mischief and mirth, and Elizabeth wondered how much of his charm was entirely dependant upon his gallant looks and flair for showmanship.

“You have come in hard weather, Mr. Elliott,” Elizabeth said. “How long did you ride? You do not appear to be dressed for an extended journey.”

Mr. Elliott’s smile widened slightly. “Well observed, Miss Bennet. Indeed, it was not a hard distance,” he said. “I stayed the night in Lambton to give the horses a chance to become accustomed to the weather. I could not have come along those roads with their wagon.”

“A practical choice,” Elizabeth said.

“Come, George, to the fire with you,” Mrs. Elliott cried as she tugged on her son’s elbow. Elizabeth let out a relieved breath to be removed from the gentleman’s scrutiny.

A servant appeared to sweep the snow out of the door and Elizabeth pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders as the wind whipped through the foyer once more. Though Elizabeth would have liked to escape the excitement of George Elliott's arrival, the fire in the parlor was roaring high and the room was warm.

Elizabeth took a seat upon one of the couches and tried her very best to be a silent observer as Mrs. Elliott did her very best to put her gallant son into an even brighter light. It seemed strange that her hostess should put so much effort into such an endeavor. If George Elliott was as much of a prize as she proclaimed him to be, why would he need her assistance in securing a suitable wife—and how could she compare to the young ladies of the Elliott's social class?

Mrs. Elliott had mentioned that she had told her son about her... *but just what had George Elliott been told?*

Thankfully, George Elliott seemed to be entirely preoccupied in speaking with his father and Mr. Gardiner who commanded his attention with questions about his business abroad, the quality of the Friesian horseflesh he had brought with him from Holland, and above all, his excitement at returning to Derbyshire after spending so much time abroad.

"Of course, Mama, I did miss the food most of all—but you would know that in an instant..."

Mrs. Elliott laughed lightly. "You have a tendency to eat too much fish while you are abroad, George," she said. "Can you not notice it in his complexion Miss Bennet?"

Elizabeth murmured some response that she could not remember, but having not known George Elliott before his departure from Grove House, she could not offer any proper opinion. Surely, it was just a ploy to require her to examine George Elliott's handsome face more closely to look for imperfections in his skin and a general examination of his health—Elizabeth was not fond of games on a general level, but she did not appreciate

being forced into other sorts of games either. Especially when her emotions, and her future, were being dangled as a possible prize.

“Miss Bennet,” George Elliott said suddenly. “Would you like to go for a sleigh ride? The snow is deep enough to accommodate the sleigh stored in the barns...”

“Are you certain?” Elizabeth asked shakily. She felt off balance and unsure of him and could not quite determine why.

“Very certain, indeed,” he replied.

“Come now, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Elliott chided her. “You are not nervous, surely!”

“Indeed, I confess that I must be,” Elizabeth said. “It has been quite some time since I have ridden in an open carriage... especially over snow... never over snow! Are the horses—”

“I can assure you that they are quite ready and eager to pull the sleigh,” George Elliott said confidently. “They have been champing at the bit since we arrived in England, and I am most eager to oblige them. These horses are well bred and ready to work.”

“As you say,” Elizabeth replied softly as the room erupted in applause and exclamations of delight.

“What a merry group we shall be!” Mrs. Elliott said as she clapped her hands.

Elizabeth was not so certain of such a thing, but it did not seem prudent to argue with her hostess, especially after the day they had experienced.

The Elliotts wasted no time in their enjoyment of the unexpected weather. Furs and heavy winter coats were brought out of their winter storage so that they would all be warm enough to endure their time in the cold.

Despite Elizabeth's misgivings and hesitations, which she tried desperately to hide as the group made their way to the stables, she found that she was looking forward to seeing the estate while able to stay warm under blankets and furs. They had come to Derbyshire to experience the unique countryside, and she had been bereft at the sudden change in weather which had rendered useless all of their plans for brisk walks in the spring sunshine and dashed all Mr. Gardiner's hopes of being able to do some fishing on their journey.

A sleigh ride through the newly fallen snow would have to suffice.

George Elliott's jovial voice was loud and echoed through the still air as he exclaimed over how much the estate had 'changed and yet not changed at all' while he had been away.

"You have not been gone so long as that," Mr. Elliott harrumphed as he stomped through the knee-deep snow to clear a path for his wife and the rest of their party.

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Elliott cried. "It feels as though he has been away from us for an eternity!"

"Only two years, my dear," Mr. Elliott reminded her.

“A lifetime, at least!”

Elizabeth shook her head at the woman’s dramatics. It was very clear that George was the favorite of her two children, and, much like Lydia, Elizabeth had no doubt that George Elliott had been absolved of a great many indiscretions in his lifetime because of it.

Elizabeth watched as the young man deftly bridled the giant horses and led them to the sleigh that the stable boys had pulled out from between the Elliott’s two carriages and placed in the snowy stable yard.

George Elliott worked quickly to set the horses into their positions and Elizabeth could not help but admire how well he worked with the animals. He jumped down from the top of the sleigh and offered his hand to the ladies to help them climb up into the plush seats. Elizabeth felt her cheeks warm as the gentleman fixed her with a bright smile when she put her gloved hand in his. Though she supposed that he might have been somewhat of an unpredictable rogue, at least George Elliott had the good sense to be dashing about it.

Almost as soon as they were settled, the young man leapt up into the driver’s seat and took the reins into his hands. He looked over his shoulder to smile broadly at his mother who clapped her hands with joy.

“Now, do not go too quickly, George,” she called out as he whistled sharply to the horses. “Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Bennet are not accustomed to your pace!”

George Elliott laughed and snapped the reins. The sleigh lurched into motion and the stable boys waved as they began to move forward through the snow. Mr. Elliott and Mr. Gardiner held tightly to their hats as the wind threatened to tug them from their heads and send them tumbling to the snow covered ground that rushed by.

Elizabeth held tightly to the edge of the sleigh as she tried to mask the panic that she felt to be moving so quickly over such unfamiliar territory. The cold air nipped at her nose and cheeks,

and Elizabeth was grateful for the fur blankets that covered her legs.

“Is this not wonderful, Lizzy?” Mrs. Gardiner said breathlessly.

Elizabeth could only nod in reply as the sleigh descended another dip in the field. *How did he know where to steer the horses? The ground was almost completely obscured by snow—what if they were to careen off course?*

“To Pemberley, Lad,” Mr. Elliott called out to his son. George complied at once and turned the horses toward a stand of pine trees that marked out the separation between estates.

Elizabeth’s breath caught in her throat for what must have been the hundredth time as the horses plunged through the snow and the sleigh bounced over the uneven ground. This hardly seemed a proper speed to travel at, and Elizabeth wished that she were a little braver. Mrs. Elliott’s cheeks were pink with delight and her aunt’s laughter was bright and cheerful and Elizabeth hoped that she did not look as terror-stricken as she felt.

“There it is, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Elliott said as he gestured to the house that emerged from the trees.

“Oh!” Elizabeth had not meant for her exclamation to be one of such surprise, but she could not help herself. The house was beautiful against the unseasonable wintry landscape and seemed not to dominate the space it had been set upon, but complemented it most elegantly instead. She could see depressions in the snow and dark rocks where a stream would rush past the front gardens and Mr. Gardiner rose slightly in his seat to catch a glimpse of the frozen lake and the stream.

“Excellent trout,” he said with a smile. “Mr. Darcy’s father was a keen angler and he kept the lake well stocked—”

“I am surprised that you did not catch them all,” Mr. Elliott chuckled.

“Not for lack of trying,” Mrs. Gardiner teased her husband.

“Indeed not,” Mr. Gardiner said somewhat defensively and Elizabeth smiled fondly at him. Her momentary peace was dashed

almost immediately as the sleigh came to an abrupt stop and George Elliott turned in his seat to look down at them.

“Shall we go on to the house, Mama?” he asked.

Mrs. Elliott looked somewhat uncomfortable and then shook her head. “I think not, George, we shall send one of the servants with a note to invite Mr. Darcy for supper one night I should think... perhaps when the snow has melted. I do not want to impose, and if they are away from the house— No. I think we shall not today.”

George Elliott nodded briefly and snapped the reins over the horses’ wide backs and the sleigh lurched forward once more.

“Perhaps two horses was unnecessary,” Mrs. Gardiner gasped as the sleigh picked up speed.

“You were never afraid of going too quickly when you were a girl, Florence,” Mrs. Elliott laughed. Mrs. Gardiner pressed her lips together and gripped Elizabeth’s hand as George Elliott drove the horses up the winding road that led back to the main road. Elizabeth looked over her shoulder to the house once more. She thought she saw a figure standing at one of the second floor windows to watch them leave, but she could not be certain.

George Elliott commanded their sleigh ride until Elizabeth was cold through to her very bones and Mrs. Elliott finally noticed that she was the only one having a good time. She seemed reluctant to return to Grove House, but Elizabeth was not certain that she could endure much more of this ‘merriment.’

“Now, Elizabeth, you really must reconsider your thoughts on venturing out skating. I daresay the pond will be well frozen over by now,” Mrs. Elliott declared.

“I cannot say,” Elizabeth replied through chattering teeth as George Elliott pulled the massive horses to a stop in front of the stables. They were met by the stable boys who ran out to greet

them and help with the horses.

George Elliott jumped down from the driver's seat into the snow and held out his hand to assist his mother as she stepped down from the sleigh. "Perhaps Miss Bennet will be more amenable to your suggestions when she has been warmed by the fire," George Elliott said with a smile. Elizabeth felt a hot blush flood into her cold cheeks as the young man winked at her over his mother's shoulder.

"Some hot cider will set you right again," Mrs. Gardiner said reassuringly as she took her husband's assistance to step down into the packed snow of the stable yard.

"Indeed, I do hope so," Elizabeth said, but she was not optimistic. Her teeth chattered and she did not know if she would ever regain the feeling in her fingers and toes. They had not been outdoors for very long, but it had felt like an eternity to her.

George Elliott helped her down from the sleigh and Elizabeth stumbled against him as her numb feet tried to hold her weight. He caught her easily and chuckled warmly as he set her upright once more. Elizabeth blushed furiously and hoped that her unsteadiness had not been noticed.

"Hot cider for everyone," Mr. Elliott called out.

Elizabeth extricate herself from George Elliott's helpful grip and took her aunt's arm for support as they walked back to the house through the snow.

Safely returned to the house, Elizabeth and the others retired to their rooms to prepare for supper, and Elizabeth could not have been more grateful to see a jug of steaming washing water in her life. It had obviously been brought here by the vigilant service staff who had seen the party returning from their frigid adventure.

She did her best to warm herself with the hot water and dressed as warmly as she could. The maid, Alice, had been kind enough to bring some of her former mistress' woollen dresses up from where they had been stored for Elizabeth to wear, and the faint smell of the dried lavender that had been tucked away with it clung to the warm material, making Elizabeth all the more comfortable.

When she returned to the parlor, a trifle warmer but still not quite herself, Elizabeth discovered Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, and all three Elliotts were enjoying cups of hot cider and mulled wine that had no doubt been hastily prepared when the snow first began to fall.

"Ah, Miss Bennet!" Mr. Elliott cried as she came through the parlor door. His face was red from the warmth of the mulled wine and his smile was broad and welcoming. "I trust you are recovered from our little sleigh ride?"

Elizabeth smiled and accepted the cup of hot cider that Mrs. Gardiner offered her. It was good to wrap her hands around the warm glass and even better to take a sip of the cinnamon-spiced liquid.

"Recovered enough for now," Elizabeth replied. "But I will feel much better when I can put some warmth back into my feet."

"Come, sit by the fire," Mrs. Elliott said with a smile.

Elizabeth allowed herself to be led to a large leather chair that had been set close to the blazing logs. She sighed happily as she settled herself into the chair and the warmth of the flames began to seep into her limbs.

As with every year, as soon as the snow had melted from Longbourn's gardens, Elizabeth had thought she was tired of winter and being cold every moment.. but now that she was at Grove House in the middle of a spring snowstorm, she realized that she had missed the coziness of the winter season. And this strange change in the weather had given her a chance to experience that feeling all over again.

Winter was her favorite season—that much was certain.

Autumn always brought with it the anticipation of the chill months that followed, and it was a time that Mary always enjoyed more than anyone else at Longbourn. She gloried in the changing of the leaves and the way the wind changed at a moments notice.

Spring was for Jane and her hopes and dreams for the future, and summer undoubtedly belonged to her younger sisters—full of stargazing, dances, and mild evenings spent talking of nothing until the sky lightened with the rising sun. But winter belonged to Elizabeth alone, and that bitter season had returned to Derbyshire with a vengeance.

“I do believe the snow will stop by the morning,” Mrs. Elliott said confidently. “Do you not agree, George?”

George Elliott leaned against the fireplace mantle and smiled good-naturedly. “I believe I do not mind what the weather does, Mama,” he said. “I was away from England for Christmas, and it is quite something to have a homecoming that feels rather like I was never away. Perhaps we can convince Mrs. Newton to bake a Christmas cake for the occasion.”

He seemed very sincere, but Mrs. Elliott and Mrs. Gardiner took his words to be a grand joke and they laughed loudly in response.

“My dear George always did love Christmas *far* too much,” Mrs. Elliott gasped as their laughter died away.

Elizabeth looked up at the young man carefully, not knowing whether she expected him to be upset by what had been said about him, or if he were inclined to laugh. He did not seem a serious sort of fellow, and Elizabeth was not surprised to see him smile broadly at his mother.

George Elliott caught Elizabeth’s eye and winked at her. “My mother is *very* astute,” he said to Elizabeth. “Christmas is, indeed, my favorite season at Grove House, and I was grieved to have missed it while I was away. I am grateful to whatever weather deity has decided to favor us with a second winter while I am here.”

Mr. Elliott grumbled something unintelligible into his mulled

wine, and Mrs. Elliott laughed and slapped playfully at her husband.

The evening progressed amiably enough, and though George Elliott had been traveling for some days, he did not seem tired in the slightest, and spent much of his time ignoring his food and entertaining the assembled guests with stories of his travels abroad. Elizabeth did not participate overmuch in the conversation unless she was addressed directly, but she was more content to watch the older couples interact and try to form a better opinion of George Elliott.

He was dashing, to be sure, and had undertaken many adventures as a young man. He had seen much of Europe, and traveled to every corner of the Empire... It seemed impossible to imagine him as the master of Grove House and its estates, but that was undoubtedly the plan Mr. Elliott had in place for his only son and heir. Elizabeth could not imagine George Elliott speaking patiently with tenant farmers or overseeing the care and breeding of game and the maintenance of the estate... He was a man of action who seemed to take more than he gave, and that realization unsettled Elizabeth more than she cared to admit.

“Will you play at cards this evening, Elizabeth?” Mrs. Elliott asked as the dessert dishes were cleared away and more wine was poured.

“I thought I would write some letters tonight,” Elizabeth replied. She wanted to tell Jane all about Mr. George Elliott, and the strange estate of Pemberley with its tragic story.

“Surely, you do not pine for Hertfordshire already? Or perhaps you wish to make your sisters jealous of your good company.” Mrs. Elliott said with a catlike smile.

Elizabeth took a sip from her wine and let the rich liquid sit on her tongue for just a moment before swallowing. Mrs. Elliott was surely trying to bait her into saying something embarrassing, but Elizabeth was too exhausted by the excitement of the day to rise to

the challenge that had been offered.

“Indeed, we had hoped that Jane would come along on our little adventure,” Mrs. Gardiner said hastily. She knew her friend well enough to sense that something was not right, but Elizabeth was not sure when Mrs. Elliott’s mood had changed.

Perhaps her son’s arrival had altered the other woman’s perception of Elizabeth as a potential partner for her favorite child. Truth be told, they seemed ill-suited to each other—at least as far as Elizabeth could see.

This brash young man would have no time for her books and long walks under the trees, and Elizabeth doubted very much that he would be accommodating to her requests to return to Longbourn to visit her family. Mrs. Bennet would adore him immediately, but Elizabeth already knew that her father would find George Elliott’s good-natured bluster tiresome in a very short amount of time.

“Ah, yes,” Mrs. Elliott continued. “I had almost forgotten that Florence had told me of your rather full household... How terrible for your poor mama to have only daughters and no sons to cheer her or make her laugh.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together at the audacity of such a statement. “I can assure you that Longbourn is very merry,” Elizabeth said stiffly.

Mrs. Elliott seemed not to notice Elizabeth’s annoyance and her conversation veered away to another tedious topic—a list of the ‘charming’ pieces of art and interest that her dear George had sent home while he was abroad.

Elizabeth sipped at her wine and tried to ignore the feel of George Elliott’s eyes upon her as he spoke to Mr. Gardiner of the fishing he had encountered while he was away.

He gestured grandly, no doubt describing the size of the fish he had caught in this particular part of the story. “... And the rivers of northern Italy—Unmatched in all the world! Why you would not believe that water could be so clear.” George Elliott swept his hair

back from his forehead and flashed a charming grin at his audience.

Mr. Gardiner seemed entirely intrigued and Elizabeth wondered if her aunt should be concerned that her husband might already be devising a plan for a trip abroad during the summer months.

“But you are home now, George,” Mrs. Elliott said with a smile. “Surely, you will turn your mind to other things.”

“And what would those other things be, Mama?” the young man drawled.

Mrs. Elliott laughed but did not answer her son, and Mr. Elliott took that moment to take his leave of the table. “I believe I know where this conversation is headed... George, Gardiner, will you join me in the drawing room?”

Mr. Elliott and his son kissed Mrs. Elliott’s cheeks and made her giggle girlishly with their affection before they departed the dining room and left the ladies to decide how they would spend their evening.

Elizabeth had her own plan, and it did not involve sitting in the parlor with her aunt and Mrs. Elliott while they discussed their hostess’ favorite topic — George Elliott.

“I fear I have not quite recovered from the cold this afternoon,” Elizabeth said by way of apology as they rose from the table. “And I do need to write those letters. When the storm lets up, I will be anxious to post them to Hertfordshire.”

“As you wish,” Mrs. Elliott sighed. “My Flora *loves* the cold months,” she said to Mrs. Gardiner. “These southern girls are not strong enough for this climate!”

Mrs. Elliott had meant those words to be teasingly light, but they sounded sharp in Elizabeth’s ears and her answering smile was more than a little forced as she bid them goodnight.

“Not strong enough, indeed,” Elizabeth muttered as she climbed the stairs to the second floor of the house. She could hear masculine conversation and laughter from the drawing room, and the delicate tang of pipe smoke hung in the air. Mrs. Gardiner and

Mrs. Elliott would sit in the parlor playing cards, drinking port, and talking until very late... and had Elizabeth been staying at Gracechurch Street with only her aunt and uncle for company she would have been very happy to participate, but she did not like the way the mood at Grove House had changed since George Elliott's arrival.

But, perhaps, she was being silly. There was no reason to suspect that anything more nefarious than clandestine wedding plans were afoot. Though if Mrs. Elliott believed her to be of a weak constitution and unsuitable to her 'darling George,' perhaps it would not be as monumental a problem as she had feared.

Safely in her bedchamber Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief as she seated herself upon the bed and pulled out the writing desk that had been left in the room for the occupant's use.

She examined the contents curiously and smiled at the various items she found inside. Three quills, a pencil and small piece of gum to erase erroneous letters, two pots of ink, one dried up, the other with just enough liquid left inside to meet Elizabeth's needs, and several sheets of medium quality paper. Nubs of sealing wax in various states of uselessness were the only disappointment, but that could be easily rectified in the morning.

Elizabeth set down to writing and did her best to describe everything to Jane in as much detail as possible. Grove House and the estate, the unexpected snowfall and wintry weather that gripped the countryside, and the mysterious gentleman who lived so close to the Elliot's, and was still so isolated. Elizabeth had spent much more of her time than she had expected thinking about the widower of Pemberley. To lose someone so dear in such a tragic way—she could not bear the sadness of it. He had his daughter to cheer him, but no doubt she was the mirror image of her mother, and seeing her sweet face each day would remind him bitterly of the love he had lost so unfairly.

Of course, Elizabeth knew nothing of Mr. Darcy, or his wife and child... but she could imagine how a proper gentleman would

grieve for the love of his life. She could imagine how it would feel to lose the one person in the world who could be trusted with her heart. It would devastate the strongest person. Of that she had no doubt whatsoever.

That was the kind of love that she sought for herself—one that, strange as it seemed, would leave her hollowed out by its loss. The very deepest love. Nothing less would do. For nothing else could be real to her.

She wished for the thousandth time that Jane were here to tell her how she should approach the puzzle that was George Elliott. Elizabeth felt that she had a small idea of who this gentleman might be, but she could not be certain. He had only just arrived at Grove House, but Elizabeth prided herself on being able to cast a careful judgement upon the people she met within a very short amount of time—but George Elliott was proving difficult to form an opinion of. Her initial impressions were very shallow and she found that more frustrating than anything else that had happened since they had arrived at Grove House.

Elizabeth folded her letter to Jane and wrote a quick note for her father that could be slipped inside the paper for her sister to deliver. She was well, the country was beautiful, but the snow was unbearable and she could not see any sense in living so far away from London. All sentiments that she knew her father would read and smile upon. Mr. Bennet loved nothing so well as Longbourn and Hertfordshire and Elizabeth found that, as the years passed, she was beginning to feel similarly.

There was such a thing as too much city, and too much country. Hertfordshire offered both without much fuss.

Satisfied with her letters, Elizabeth wrapped her shawl more tightly around her shoulders and looked out the window to the snow-covered darkness beyond the house. The light from the rooms that were still occupied painted the snow gold and orange and Elizabeth sighed heavily. She would *have* to participate in their merrymaking at some point, but it would not be tonight. Perhaps

tomorrow.

She rose from the vanity chair and placed another log upon the fire. Mrs. Elliott's flippant comment about Elizabeth's constitution still hung in her mind and as she stared into the flames she decided that she would have to be a little bolder if she were to be respected at Grove House. No doubt Flora Elliott was a competent horsewoman who did not shy away from riding too fast or casting a fishing line with her father. Elizabeth snorted briefly. She could not pretend that she was not terrified of the gigantic black horses or the speed at which the sleigh had moved over the snow. But there were other ways to show her mettle.

She was not trying to prove that she would be a good match for George Elliott, she wanted to prove to herself that she could be brave in such situations. She would have to start small.

Skating would be an easy place to start. It had been cold enough, and Mr. Elliott seemed convinced that Grove House's much-lauded pond had frozen enough to support their weight.

"Tomorrow, then," Elizabeth said aloud.

She dressed for bed with a determined set to her jaw. Tomorrow she would prove that she was not afraid.

Elizabeth was awake earlier than usual the next morning,

and she rang for washing water before the wide-eyed maid had a chance to knock on her door to warn her of Mrs. Elliott's expectations for an early-rising household.

Alice brought washing water and another of Flora Elliott's woollen dresses for Elizabeth to wear.

"This is very kind," Elizabeth said as she laid it out upon the bed. "The muslin I brought from Hertfordshire would not do in weather such as this."

"Surely not," Alice replied with a small smile. "I daresay I keep my woollens close by until summer is well underway."

"A prudent decision."

"Will you need me to remind you of the time, Miss Bennet?" Alice asked.

Elizabeth eyed the ticking hands of the clock upon the mantle and shook her head. "I think not. I am awake and ready to take on the day. It appears as though the weather has decided to lighten just enough to make for a pleasant outing."

"If you say so, Miss," Alice said with a smile. "I have heard some talk of an outing for later in the morning—Mrs. Elliott has requested some picnic hampers to be prepared."

"How nice," Elizabeth murmured.

The Elliott's were clearly very fond of outdoor activities, though Mrs. Elliott's plump frame indicated that the matriarch of the

family took a more passive role in such things.

Elizabeth dressed for the morning and was careful to pull two sets of woollen stockings over her legs to help keep out some of the cold. She would, no doubt, be chilled to the bone in short order, but it would help in the meantime.

She tucked the letters she had written the night before into a pocket of her dress, intent on finding sealing wax before giving them to one of the maids for delivery into Lambton and then onward to Longbourn. She knew that the letters would be delayed by the weather, and she hoped that she would have more news to add to them by the time delivery was possible.

The house was still quiet, but it was very early yet, though Elizabeth knew that the dining room would be bustling with people and servants in a very short amount of time. She came into the parlor, hoping to find a writing box, but instead she found Mr. George Elliott reading a book of poetry by the fire.

He looked up as she entered, and Elizabeth felt a hot blush creep up her neck. "I do apologize," she said. "I did not mean to disturb your reading."

George Elliott's charming smile made Elizabeth's stomach twist slightly and she felt herself relax somewhat.

"There is no need for apology," he said. "I am an early riser, earlier than even my mother, which is a feat unto itself."

Elizabeth smiled at his good-natured tone. Clearly, this penchant for early mornings was not a new addition to the Elliott family schedule.

"I believe my sisters would call for a mutiny if they were forced from their beds so early," she said.

"And yet you have adapted very well," he said. "Or perhaps you are not sleeping as well here at Grove House as you do at home?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "Oh, no. Indeed, I have slept very well here. I appreciate a change of routine every now and again. But I was looking for a writing box—I have some letters which require sealing... I thought I might find one here."

George Elliott closed his book and set it down upon the small table beside his chair. He stood and made a dramatic bow that caused Elizabeth to smile at his purposeful showmanship. "Shall I assist you in your quest, Miss Elizabeth?" he asked with mock gallantry.

"I would be *most* honored," Elizabeth laughed.

They searched the parlor in vain for a writing desk, and Elizabeth was feeling frustrated at the length of time it had taken to complete such a mundane task, but George Elliott seemed not to notice her annoyance.

He asked her questions about Longbourn, and what she did to pass her time in the countryside.

"My sister might as well have been like a brother to me," he confessed. "I know nothing of what young women do with their time. Flora did everything I did, whether Papa allowed her to or not. She raced me through the estate on the back of her pony, swam in the lake, fished, and I believe she even shot a pheasant or two for our supper."

Elizabeth was shocked, but tried her best not to show it. George Elliott, however, was not fooled, and he chuckled at her startled expression.

"You can imagine my surprise when I discovered that this was not how young ladies were supposed to behave," he said. "I pity Flora's poor husband—"

"But what does she do now?" Elizabeth asked desperately, she could not imagine such a bold young woman with a husband of her own, and yet Flora Elliott was, indeed, married, and had been for the better part of five years.

"Whatever she likes, I imagine," George laughed. "Mama tells me that she did not slow down even while she was pregnant. Bold daughters for a bold young woman."

"My goodness," Elizabeth said quietly. "It is no wonder that your mother has nothing but enthusiasm for... exercise and the outdoors."

“You needn’t feel self-conscious, Miss Elizabeth,” he said seriously. “My mother’s expectations are the stuff of legend, and I fear that she will find herself mightily disappointed in the coming years because of it.”

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warming, but she could think of nothing to say. George Elliott’s deep blue eyes held hers steadily and she had to look away.

“What am I to do about sealing wax?” she said quickly to break the tension that had fallen between them.

George Elliott snapped his fingers sharply. “My father’s study. He writes very few letters, but when he does, they are always prodigiously sealed. He is sure to have what we are looking for.”

Elizabeth took George Elliott’s proffered elbow and allowed him to lead her out of the parlor toward Mr. Elliott’s study. As he pushed the door open, Elizabeth covered her mouth with her letters to keep from gasping aloud. Thomas Elliott’s study was dominated by a massive mahogany desk, but where Elizabeth’s father’s study was a minimalistic room that was used as an escape from the chaos of the house, Mr. Elliott’s desk was an exercise in chaos. Had it been some kind of organized chaos Elizabeth would not have been so shocked—but it was a disaster. The surface of the desk was strewn with paper, parchment and books. Ink was spilled upon the dark wood surface, there was no telling how old the plates of food that sat upon the sideboard were.

“Oh, dear,” George Elliott chuckled. “I shall have to set Mrs. Spencer to her work in here.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth breathed. She blinked quickly as she tried to make some sense of what she was seeing.

“Ask you can see, my father spends a scarce amount of time at his desk,” George said.

“But... the running of the estate, surely—” Elizabeth stopped herself as she realized that it was none of her business.

George Elliott chuckled. “That would be my mother’s responsibility. Papa is hardly of a mind for details like payment of

wages and how much the tenant farms bring in... Mama is much better suited to such things.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together to keep from saying anything more. She could not imagine her mother being in control of the household ledgers, or that her father would allow such a thing. Would that be what George Elliott would expect from his future wife? She watched as the young man began to rifle through his father’s papers in search of sealing wax. A quill fell to the floor, and then a sheaf of paper teetered on the edge of the desk and Elizabeth rushed forward to catch it before it spilled over the plush carpet.

“Well done,” George Elliott laughed. “We would have been here for hours setting every paper back into its original position. This desk may look like a battleground, but my father knows where each piece of paper should be.”

“That seems impossible,” Elizabeth blurted out as she handed him the stack of papers.

“It does, indeed,” he agreed as he set down the papers and turned them ever so slightly to a specific position on the edge of the desk and retrieved the fallen quill from the floor. “But when I was ten years old I snuck into this room in search of a piece of chalk, and thought I had been very secretive about it. But my father knew at once that something was amiss, and that man has a temper I would not test on purpose...”

“Oh, my,” Elizabeth murmured for she did not know what else to say.

“Ah! Just what you seek, Miss Elizabeth.” He held up a stick of red sealing wax and smiled triumphantly.

“Wonderful,” she replied. She wanted nothing more than to vacate this room before Mr. Elliott descended the stairs and found them skulking about his study like naughty children.

George Elliott pressed the wax into Elizabeth’s hand and she tried not to notice the way his fingers brushed against her bare palm as he did so. She tucked the wax into the pocket of her

borrowed dress with the letters—she would seal them later and return the wax to him presently. After breakfast, perhaps.

There was the noise of conversation in the corridor, and Elizabeth's heart lurched in her chest. "They are coming down, we must go," she said.

George Elliott only nodded, but she could see that he wanted to be out of the study as much as she. *We should not have been alone together*, she scolded herself as they walked down the corridor toward the breakfast room. Elizabeth could hear the *clink* of teacups and worried that Mrs. Elliott would scold them when they entered the room, but as they were about to step through the door, there was a horrifying *CRASH* as the tea tray one of the maids carried fell to the floor.

Their hostess was justifiably shocked by the accident, and was distracted enough with moaning about the damage to her carpets and her mother's tea set that she did not think to say anything to Elizabeth and George as they took their seats at the table.

"I cannot bear it," Mrs. Elliott cried as her husband patted her hand.

"Now, now, no harm done, my dear," Mr. Elliott said soothingly. "Only one chipped teacup. These Indian carpets were a wise investment. Do you see how quickly the mess is being whisked away? No harm done."

"That girl lives to vex me," Mrs. Elliott muttered loudly and Elizabeth saw the red-faced maid quickly gather up the towels she was using to soak up the spilled tea and hurry from the room. It must have been Alice. She would have to remember to give the girl some kind words later in the day to ease the sting of her mistress' anger.

"No matter," she continued. "We have a busy day ahead of us." Mrs. Elliott smiled at Elizabeth. "Perhaps you will feel up to a walk today, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth bit her tongue for just a moment before she replied, "I had thought that I might skate today," she said. "The weather

seems to have calmed enough to make for a beautiful day.”

Mrs. Elliott clapped her hands in surprise. “How wonderful! The pond will be well and truly frozen by now, and I daresay the stable boys will enjoy sweeping it of snow to clear the way for you. I will see to it that everything you need is cleaned and available. Why, my Flora loved to skate, did she not, George?”

“She did, indeed, Mama,” George Elliott replied. Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed again as he smiled at her over the rim of his teacup. Mrs. Elliott did not notice the exchange, but from the expression on Mrs. Gardiner’s face, Elizabeth could not be certain that her aunt had not seen it very clearly.

The spilled tea had been cleared away quickly, and a fresh pot brought into the breakfast room to accommodate the diners.

Mr. Gardiner begged for coffee, clearly he had stayed up far too late the night before with Mr. Elliott and his son in the drawing room. Mrs. Gardiner teased him playfully about his pale complexion and Elizabeth chose to focus on her breakfast rather than the small problem that Mr. George Elliott presented.

After breakfast, Elizabeth returned to her bedchamber to seal her letters. She did not know quite what to make of George Elliott, and she needed the time alone to sort through her thoughts. He was not as she had expected upon first meeting him—perhaps there was more to the young man than she expected; but what did it matter?

A knock at the chamber door made Elizabeth turn. Mrs. Gardiner stood in the doorway with a smile upon her face. “Lizzy, are you ready for our afternoon adventure? I had thought you would only be willing to take a walk, but I am thrilled that you are feeling more daring... what could have prompted this sudden

change of heart?”

Elizabeth smiled and tucked the sealing wax into the pocket of her borrowed dress. “It is not a change of heart,” she replied simply. “I simply wanted to try something new. There is precious little skating to be found in Meryton and it has been years since I had the opportunity to partake in such things.”

“A fine idea,” Mrs. Gardiner said enthusiastically. “Mrs. Elliott has prepared a picnic luncheon for us to take on our walk.”

“Then we shall not keep her waiting,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “I must give these letters to Alice—if there is a chance someone will be going into Lambton I would hope that they might be delivered.”

Mrs. Gardiner looked over Elizabeth’s shoulder to the window. “As much as I love the snow, I do hope it will not linger for very much longer... We had not planned to stay for quite so long, but it seems that we will have no choice in the matter. Your uncle has business in London and has been unable to get any messages through to his partners... I should tell him to write his own letters to be delivered with yours to Lambton.”

Elizabeth followed her aunt out of the room and down the corridor toward the stairs. She was thankful, once again, for the woollen dress and stockings that she had been lent as the stairwell, and, indeed, much of the house was very cold.

There was a good deal of noise in the foyer as Mrs. Elliott gave directions to the household staff as to what would be needed for their outing. George Elliott leaned against the bannister and smiled at her as she arrived with her aunt and Elizabeth tried her best to nod politely in his direction. Mrs. Gardiner would be watching her carefully, of that she had no doubt.

“Florence! There you are,” Mrs. Elliott cried. “Do help me sort through these things... I had asked for all of our winter coats to be brought up, but they are in such a muddle I fear I shall lose my wits trying to find what I am looking for!” Mrs. Gardiner went to assist her friend without a moment’s pause and Elizabeth took the

opportunity to remove herself from the crowded foyer without anyone's notice. She walked down the corridor toward the kitchens where she knew Alice would be.

"Miss Elizabeth..." George Elliott's voice startled her, but she only looked over her shoulder at him to deny him the satisfaction of having caught her off guard.

"Mr. Elliott," she said. She drew the sealing wax from her pocket and held it out to him as he fell into step beside her. "Thank you for this, you may now devise some way to return it to your father's study without raising any suspicion. I had thought to give it to one of the maids—"

"It is very lucky that you did not," he exclaimed. "Papa has forbidden anyone but Mrs. Spencer from entering that room. There would have been a terrible fuss if he had discovered such a thing had occurred."

Elizabeth smiled as she imagined the elder Mr. Elliott ranting and raving about the state of his study as he paced the drawing room carpet with a glass of brandy in his hand. If the marks on the worn carpet were to be believed, Elizabeth had no doubt that that very scenario had occurred on several occasions over the time the Elliott family had lived at Grove House.

"Are you trying to escape your promise to come skating?" George Elliott teased her.

Elizabeth held up her letters in defense. "I am not," she declared. "I shall see these safely delivered to Alice and then I shall be ready to venture out into the weather to appease your dear mama."

George Elliott snorted lightly. "I fear that is an impossible task, but I applaud your tenacity, Miss Elizabeth. I will leave you to your errand and shall look for you by the stables shortly."

Elizabeth nodded as he turned to walk away and noted that he checked the corridor before slipping through the door that led to his father's study. She chuckled quietly and hurried to the kitchens where she found Alice peeling apples—no doubt a punishment for

her earlier clumsiness.

The girl took the letters with a smile, obviously pleased to have been given a task that did not involve apples and Elizabeth left the kitchen knowing that the girl would do her utmost to be sure that the letters were delivered to the postal carriage as soon as she was able.

The shouting in the foyer had calmed, and Elizabeth felt safe to return to the party to see what had transpired. It seemed that Mrs. Gardiner was a wonder with organization and Mrs. Elliott's misery over the mess that had been dumped unceremoniously upon the hardwood floors of the foyer had been averted. The coats, furs, blankets, and other such wintery things were now organized into sizes and had been draped over the furniture in the parlor. Elizabeth was grateful for the warmth of the room and to see Mrs. Elliott smiling once more.

"Elizabeth, there you are!" Mrs. Elliott cried. "Here, come and select a coat. There are a few of Flora's old coats here that should fit you quite nicely, although they may be snug around the waistline..."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and took the coat that was held out for her. It would fit her very well, indeed, she could see that already. Mrs. Elliott's comment about her waistline had been entirely unnecessary but Elizabeth knew better than to say anything. She had heard of other young woman who had run afoul of their husband's mothers—and Elizabeth had a feeling that any young woman who happened to accept an offer of marriage from George Elliott would have to understand that his mother would be a part of the arrangement... whether they were amenable to it or no. She was not even close to considering such a thing, but already she felt the heavy weight of Mrs. Elliott's scrutiny upon her. It was clear that no one could ever hope to measure up to Flora Elliott, or be suitable enough for her precious son.

Once they were suitably bundled against the weather, Elizabeth, her aunt and uncle, and the Elliots ventured out into the snow.

George and his father went first, clearing a path through the knee-deep snow with their heavy boots and long strides. Mrs. Elliott's face was red-cheeked and her expression elated, and Elizabeth knew that it was in no small part due to the gallantry of her son and husband as they led the way.

As promised, the pond had been cleared of its snow and a path that allowed access to the edge of the ice had been made by the stable boys. Elizabeth had not seen the pond before the snow had fallen, but to her eye it looked much larger than it should have. Closer in size to a lake than any pond she had yet encountered.

Ponds were for hunting frogs and splashing in... this was certainly much bigger.

"How deep is the water?" Elizabeth asked quietly as they approached.

"Certainly deep enough to give good swimming in the heat of the summer months," Mrs Gardiner replied. "Are you nervous, Lizzy? It might be the wrong season, but I can assure you that these early spring freezes are very common..."

"No... no. Indeed not." But Elizabeth's reply was most assuredly a lie. Elizabeth had not believed that she was nervous until they approached the edge of the pond, and as she spied the blades that would be strapped to the bottom of her boots she felt a hint of fear begin to creep up her spine.

"Mr. Elliott is desperate to check the hazelnut trees," Mrs. Elliott announced, "but we shall return presently to skate with you, Elizabeth."

"Will you be all right on your own?" Mrs. Gardiner asked.

"Of course," Elizabeth replied with more confidence than she

felt. She knew how to fit the blades onto her boots well enough, but the thought of stepping onto the ice was almost overwhelming.

However, if she were alone there would be no one observing as she struggle to find, and keep, her balance on the slick surface. The last time she had skated, she had Jane to hold onto as they both laughed and shrieked and tried to stay upright on their skates.

A small wooden bench had been cleared of snow and spread with a dark red woollen blanket so that the skaters could sit down comfortably to affix the blades to their shoes. Elizabeth perched on the edge of the bench and smiled at her aunt, who appeared somewhat worried by the whole situation. However, Mrs. Gardiner's expression faded as her husband cajoled her into falling into step with their hosts.

George Elliott looked back over his shoulder at her as Elizabeth picked the blades up off the hard-packed ground.

"We will return soon, Miss Elizabeth," he said reassuringly.

Elizabeth only nodded and waved him away. She was determined to do this on her own. By the time they returned she would be gliding confidently across the frozen surface of the pond.

She bent her head and focused on fastening the leather straps around the toes of her boots. Though the snow had stopped, the sky had not cleared of its gray cloud and the wind was biting and cruel. Elizabeth's fingers were numb and red and she longed to pull on the gloves that she had stuffed into the pocket of her borrowed coat.

With the blades fastened tightly, Elizabeth stood up and pulled the knitted gloves over her red fingers.

The skating blades felt strange on her feet, and she teetered just a little before finding her balance. Elizabeth walked slowly to the edge of the pond, careful to check over her shoulder to see if she was being watched.

In the distance she could see the bright mufflers and gloves of

her aunt and Mrs. Elliott against the white snow as they checked the hazelnut trees Mr. Elliott had been so worried about. The stable boys had also disappeared, no doubt to find somewhere to warm their own cold hands and feet.

Elizabeth's breath fogged in the air in front of her and she tried to find the courage she knew was hiding somewhere inside her. She pushed back her shoulders, lifted her chin, and stepped out onto the ice.

Her first steps were delicate as she struggled to keep her balance. She laughed softly as she spread out her arms to keep upright. Her sisters would have been in hysterics to see her standing like a newborn deer trying to stay upright.

It took several minutes, but Elizabeth was finally able to make some movement. Every few strides she slipped and almost fell, but she was proud of herself for staying on her feet. The last time she had skated with Jane, it had all ended with them falling into a laughing heap upon the snow-covered bank. She had been covered in bruises for almost a week and every muscle in her body had ached unceasingly.

A joyous misery.

It was a pity that Jane would not see her now.

She glided across the dark, frozen surface with more confidence and felt the rush of the cold wind on her cheeks. Elizabeth closed her eyes as she reached the middle of the pond and allowed herself to relax just a little.

She felt the ice flex under her skates before she heard the *crack* as it broke.

Her eyes flew open and her arms pinwheeled as the ice gave way. She let out a thin scream, but knew that anyone who could have helped her was too far away.

The water was cold, so cold, as it enveloped her ankles and then her legs. Panic coursed through her as she tried to get some kind of grip on the broken ice, but there was no use. She gasped as the cold took hold of her. The ice broke under Elizabeth's weight

and she cried out as the icy water enveloped her. She heard a strange thundering noise and closed her eyes tightly as she kicked her feet desperately, trying to find the bottom of the pond, but it was too deep for her to reach.

The water was so cold. So dark. And she could not find her way to the surface.

“Miss Bennet? Miss Bennet are you awake?”

Elizabeth struggled to open her eyes, but it felt as though she were still underwater.

Where was she? At home in Hertfordshire?

She was still so very cold.

Her vision was blurred, but she recognized the earnest face of Mrs. Elliott’s new maid.

Not home after all.

“Alice?” Elizabeth croaked.

“I will fetch Mrs. Gardiner,” she said. Elizabeth could hear the desperation in her voice and she tried to sit up but fell back against the pillows as the maid rushed out of the room.

A headache pounded in her temples, and Elizabeth winced as her vision cleared and she realized that she was in her bedchamber at Grove House.

What had happened?

She had been skating—

“Lizzy? Oh, Lizzy!” Mrs. Gardiner rushed into the room and her eyes filled with sudden tears as her aunt sat on the edge of Elizabeth’s bed and gathered her into her arms. “We were so very worried about you!”

“What happened?” Elizabeth choked out.

“I cannot bear to think of it,” Mrs. Gardiner said tearfully.

“Please—”

Mrs. Gardiner finally released her niece and sat back. She gripped Elizabeth's shoulders tightly. "Lizzy, I am so sorry... we were so far away, we could not come to you in time..."

"What happened?" Elizabeth asked again.

"It was Mr. Darcy," a voice said from the doorway and Elizabeth looked up to see Mrs. Elliott standing in the doorway. "We are indebted to him for bringing you to safety." She entered the room with a genuine smile upon her face. "Seeing you safe and awake brings joy to my heart."

"Mr. Darcy..." Elizabeth said. "I do not understand."

"He was riding to Grove House to make certain that we were faring well in the storm," Mrs. Gardiner said. "He saw you fall into the pond. The ice. It was too thin."

"It seems that the stable boys who swept it clear; they had weakened it with their activities. We could not have known that it was not strong enough—" Mrs. Elliott seemed pained to say such things, and Elizabeth was momentarily comforted by her distress.

"No, indeed," Elizabeth said softly.

"You were very lucky," Mrs. Elliott said unnecessarily.

Elizabeth smiled weakly.

"George was too far away," she continued. "He would have come to your rescue in an instant, but Mr. Darcy was on horseback and we had only realized something was amiss when he pulled you from the water."

"He has been at Grove House every day since then," Mrs. Gardiner said softly.

"Every day?" Elizabeth asked.

Her aunt raised an eyebrow and Elizabeth could not decide how she was supposed to feel about her rescue.

"How many days have I—"

"Three days, Lizzy," Mrs. Gardiner said softly. There was a moment of silence between them as Elizabeth felt the weight of what had happened. She had almost drowned in the frozen pond... and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, a gentleman who did not know her in

the slightest, had pulled her to safety at great risk to himself.

“Three days?” Elizabeth’s mouth was dry and her stomach tightened briefly. Three days was a very long time. Suddenly, the room was too hot, and she felt sick.

“Mr. Darcy was very worried about you... We *all* were,” Mrs. Elliott said. Her voice seemed very loud in the room and Elizabeth winced involuntarily.

“I— I do not know what to say...”

“When you are feeling more yourself, we shall invite Mr. Darcy for supper,” Mrs. Elliott said. “By way of thanks, of course. He was very kind to ride out to see to our wellbeing... I am certain that he did not intend to become your rescuer.”

Mrs. Elliott laughed lightly but Elizabeth could only manage a small smile in response. It was not as though she had planned to fall through the ice.

Or, perhaps Mrs. Elliott was only upset because her dear George had not been the one to pull her from the dark water.

That thought made Elizabeth feel even more ill and Mrs. Gardiner laid a cool hand against Elizabeth’s brow.

“Lizzy, you still look so pale. Dr. Lighten did say that you would feel feverish and strange for a few days yet... You were so ill after Mr. Darcy pulled you from the water, we feared the worst... but you came through very bravely. Your fever has lingered longer than the doctor would have liked, but he will be pleased to know that you are awake.”

“It seems that our unexpected winter is in retreat,” Mrs. Elliott said brightly. “The weather has taken a turn and Mr. Elliott believes that we will be able to take the carriage into Lambton in a very few days time.”

Elizabeth smiled weakly. If the snow melted, they would be able to return to London, and from there to Hertfordshire, and though Elizabeth had not been away long, she was heartsick for Jane’s company and the carefree days she spent at Longbourn. Grove House felt too full of expectation for her to ever be

comfortable.

“That is good news,” she said in reply.

“No doubt you will be pleased to return south,” Mrs. Elliott continued. “Far away from our strange weather.” Her words were meant to be taken lightly, but Elizabeth could not find the humor in them. Perhaps it was her fever, or the glimpse she caught of George Elliott lurking in the corridor outside her chamber.

“We will let you rest now, Lizzy,” Mrs. Gardiner said warmly. “The fire is well stoked, and I shall leave a bell here beside your head should you need anything. I will send Alice in to check on you before supper to see if you are feeling up to a small meal.”

“I *am* hungry,” Elizabeth admitted as her stomach growled at the mention of food. Mrs. Gardiner and Mrs. Elliott both smiled at her pronouncement and Elizabeth laid back against the pillows that had been propped under her shoulders.

“This is a very good thing,” Mrs. Gardiner said. She kissed Elizabeth’s cheek and rose from the edge of the bed where she had been perched. “Rest.”

Elizabeth smiled as Mrs. Elliott and her aunt withdrew from the room, but she did not see George Elliott in the corridor again. Instead, Alice’s eager face appeared in the doorway.

“Can I bring you anything, Miss Bennet?” she asked after the other women had departed. “Perhaps some honey water to soothe your throat? Or some lemon tea?”

Elizabeth’s stomach rumbled again and she smiled sheepishly. “Yes, I should like something, but I cannot think of what...”

“I will see to it,” the young woman said with an answering smile. “We have all been very worried about you, it is good to see you well.”

“I thank you for your worry,” Elizabeth said, “but all is well now.”

Alice nodded and closed the door behind herself as she headed for the kitchens. Elizabeth sighed heavily and closed her eyes. She was *very* hungry, which was, no doubt, a good sign that she was on

the mend. She wished that she could have remembered what had happened, but everything that had happened after the sound of the ice breaking was a shadowy blur... She was certain that she would hear that deafening *CRACK* in her dreams for years to come.

She did not have much time to ponder what had happened as Alice returned much more quickly than Elizabeth expected. She had thought to go to the wardrobe and select a new nightgown, but when Alice opened the bedchamber door she had only just pushed back the blankets and placed her feet upon the floor when a fit of dizziness overtook her. Her face was burning hot, and she was reminded with swiftness that she had a raging fever.

“Oh, Miss Bennet!” Alice cried as she entered the room. She set down the tray she carried and rushed over to help Elizabeth back into bed.

Elizabeth groaned and allowed the girl to help her back into bed. “I was— That is I wanted—”

“Just tell me what you need, and I will fetch it for you,” Alice said.

Elizabeth sighed heavily and did as she was told. A fresh nightgown and a cool cloth for her head were brought in short order, and Elizabeth could not even summon the energy to be embarrassed as the maid helped her to undress and put on the new nightgown.

She lay back against the pillows as Alice helped her to sit up and fussed over her comfort before she pulled the blankets up to Elizabeth’s waist and set the tea tray down over her lap.

“A nice cup of lemon and honey will see you right in no time,” she said. “It always helped me when I was feeling poorly.”

“You are far too kind,” Elizabeth murmured as Alice poured a steaming cup of sweet-smelling liquid into a cup.

“It is no trouble at all,” she said. “As I said before we have all been very worried. Especially Master George... he has been pacing the parlor like his father for the last few days while you have been asleep.”

Elizabeth's eyebrow rose. "Indeed? And why would he be doing that?"

Elizabeth was not usually one for gossip, but for some reason she could not resist Alice's artless conversation. The girl did not realize that she was telling Elizabeth details about her mistress' family that should have been kept private.

"It is difficult to say," she replied as she moved around the room. "I did hear him say to Mrs. Elliott that he felt somehow responsible for your accident—that he blames himself for leaving you alone..."

"Nonsense," Elizabeth said quietly. "It was my decision. He should not feel responsible in any way. If he had been there the ice would still have broken, and probably sooner!"

"And then you would *both* have been rescued by the gentleman from Pemberley," Alice laughed. She became serious almost at once as she knelt by the fire in the hearth to lay another log upon the flames. "I shall be sad not to see him any longer. He seemed a very proper sort of gentleman. Very different from Mr. Elliott."

"How so?" Elizabeth asked. She found that she was very curious, indeed, about Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. "I was told that he was riding to Grove House to check on how the family fared during the storm. A very lucky thing to have such a conscientious neighbor."

"Very lucky, indeed," Alice agreed. "Mr. Darcy has wonderful manners, and I have never heard an unkind word said about him. He stays very quiet at Pemberley... and he has had a very sad life —"

"Yes," Elizabeth said. "I had heard of the tragedy that befell him and his family... I am very sorry for him. Mrs. Elliott did say that when I am feeling more myself that he will be invited to supper here at Grove House."

"Oh, how wonderful," Alice said with a broad smile. "He was very diligent in coming to visit you... he even spoke to the doctor about your treatment. Suggesting medicines and tonics... I do not

know if Mrs. Elliott took his kind advice, but he did offer it very sternly.”

“You see quite a bit, Alice,” Elizabeth observed. The serving girl’s cheeks reddened slightly and she stood up from the fire and brushed off her apron.

“Begging your pardon, Miss Bennet. I am scolded quite often for talking too much and listening to things I shouldn’t. Please don’t mention it to Mrs. Spencer...”

Elizabeth smiled and sipped the steaming honey lemon water. It was soothing to her throat, and she felt warmer already. “You needn’t worry,” she said. “I have no plans to tell Mrs. Spencer anything more than that you are serving your mistress very well and that I am pleased with your help and service.

“Thank you, Miss Bennet,” she said brightly. She removed the tray from Elizabeth’s lap and placed her teacup beside the silver bell that Mrs. Gardiner had left for her. “I will leave you to your rest now. But ring the bell if you need anything at all, I will not be far away.” She set the tray down upon the vanity and bobbed a small curtsy before she walked toward the chamber door.

“I shall,” Elizabeth said reassuringly, hoping that she could alleviate some of the girl’s fears about being scolded once more for her guileless talk.

Alice left her alone once more and Elizabeth could not help but feel some confusion. George Elliott felt responsible for her accident—but what could he have done about it had he been there? If her assumptions about the young man were correct, it was more likely that *he* would have been the victim of the breaking ice... he was heavier, and would be more likely to be more forceful with his skating to impress her, or show her that the ice was solid and safe. The irony of such a thing was heavy in Elizabeth’s mind.

And what if Mr. Darcy had not chosen that particular moment to check on his neighbors? What if he had been waylaid at the stables, or had decided upon some other errand to perform that day? She would surely have drowned.

A cold hand seemed to close around Elizabeth's heart and she shivered and grabbed for her teacup. The hot liquid melted away some of the fear that had gripped her. Those things had not happened—Mr. Darcy had not been waylaid or distracted, and he had come over the ridge of the hill that separated the two estates just in time to see her fall through the ice.

The noise she had heard before she went underwater... the thundering... it had been hoofbeats. It had been the sound of Mr. Darcy of Pemberley coming to her rescue.

Elizabeth drained her cup and set it down upon the saucer with a shaking hand. She had been very lucky... and she owed Mr. Darcy the sincerest of thanks for his speed and his care for a stranger.

Would George Elliott have done such a thing? She did not know the answer to that question.

With rest, and some bitter tasting tinctures from Dr. Lighten, Elizabeth regained her strength and was soon feeling well enough that Mrs. Elliott felt it was time to extend an invitation to Elizabeth's rescuer to repay him for his gallantry.

George Elliott had been solicitous of Elizabeth's recovery and had entertained her on more than one occasion by reading poetry to her in the parlor while his mother and Mrs. Gardiner played at cards or worked on their embroidery together.

Elizabeth had felt the eyes of her aunt and George's mother upon them on each of those occasions, but there was nothing she could do about it other than blush and try and distract herself enough that she could enjoy George Elliott's company.

And she did, for a time, but more often than not each of those moments when she was able to see a different side of the brash

young man it was most assuredly ruined by his mother or some other interruption.

It did not help matters that he had tried on no less than four occasions to apologize for what had happened to her—but Elizabeth did not allow him to finish his apology, nor did she wish to entertain memories of that day. It was bad enough that her dreams were filled with cold, dark water, and the feeling of the ice giving way under her feet.

More than anything, Elizabeth kept her eye on the parlor windows and the rapidly melting snow. Mr. Elliott's assertion that the snow would be gone within a few days' time had been entirely correct, and as much as Elizabeth loved the winter months, she was more than happy to see it disappear and for the weather to return to its more familiarly spring-like rain and warmer winds.

On one such rainy morning, Elizabeth came down to the breakfast room early to find Mrs. Elliott sorting through some letters that had arrived. "Ah, Elizabeth!" she greeted her with a warm smile. "There is a letter for you! It seems that your sister has written from Hertfordshire, what a delight!"

Elizabeth took the letter that her hostess held out and held it tightly against her stomach. She could not read it here, but it would not do to disappear so close to breakfast being served.

"I thank you, I have been eager for news of home, and I am happy that the letters I wrote during the storm were delivered safely." She tucked the letter into the pocket of her dress and took her seat at the table. Mrs. Elliott nodded absently and broke the seal on another carefully folded piece of paper.

"Ah! Mr. Darcy would be very pleased to come for supper. How kind. I had half-expected him to send regrets... he is so often alone sometimes I wonder if he has given up on proper society entirely!"

"Indeed," Elizabeth said softly. *Was his sorrow still so great that he could not bear to be seen in public, even in the company of friends?* "And when will he be coming?"

"Tomorrow evening," Mrs. Elliott replied with a smile. "Will

you need to borrow any of Flora's old dresses for the occasion? I confess I am not certain of their style as it has been quite a few years since she was married and moved away. They might not suit the current fashions..."

Elizabeth smiled thinly and ignored the barely concealed jab. "You needn't worry," she said. "You have been very kind to lend me warmer clothes to weather the unexpected cold, but I have clothing which is very well suited to this sort of occasion."

"Wonderful," Mrs. Elliott replied as though she had not heard the defensive tone of Elizabeth's voice. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and the rest of the household joined Elizabeth and Mrs. Elliott in the breakfast room just as the clock on the mantle struck the hour.

"Delightful news," Mrs. Elliott announced as she picked up her silver bell to ring for the tea and breakfast to be delivered. "Mr. Darcy will be joining us for supper tomorrow evening. I shall ask Mrs. Spencer to see that we have salmon for the occasion..."

"A lucky thing that the roads are clear of snow, Mama," George Elliott said quietly.

"Indeed!" his mother cried. "One cannot have a fine dinner party without a salmon upon the table. You have been away for *far* too long, George! I don't know what kind of dinner parties you attended in the colonies, but they were most certainly *not* to the standard they should have been."

Elizabeth could only cover her mouth with her hand to prevent George Elliott from seeing her smile at his stunned expression.

Mr. Elliott chuckled and drank his coffee, clearly uninterested in entering the conversation in defence of his son.

The conversation began to flow once more as Mrs. Elliott spoke of her plans for supper, and fretted over the state of the table cloth for the dining room table. Elizabeth listened and offered precious little of her opinions on the matter. This dinner party was to be given in thanks for Mr. Darcy's dashing rescue effort. She would, at last, have the opportunity to thank him for his kindness and praise his quick thinking. If he had hesitated only a moment longer—

Elizabeth set down her teacup and rose from the table. "If you will excuse me," she said haltingly as the conversation ceased. "I have received a letter from Jane and I should like to read it."

Mr. Elliott raised an eyebrow, but his wife did not seem perturbed, so he focused on the sausage upon his plate once more. "Of course, Elizabeth," Mrs. Elliott said kindly. "I am certain that your sister will be longing to hear when you plan to return home."

"Indeed," Elizabeth murmured. Jane had not yet been told of her accident, and Elizabeth was still not certain how she could convey such a thing in a letter. She avoided George Elliott's eye as she fled the room and sought the shelter of her bedchamber instead of the parlor.

Safely behind the closed door of her chamber, Elizabeth pulled out the writing box and set it down upon the bed beside herself. She opened Jane's letter with quick fingers and smiled to see her sister's familiar script.

All was well at Longbourn—but Papa had heard news of the storm from a friend in London and had been very concerned.

Elizabeth felt a pang as she re-read Jane's words and hoped that this letter had not been too long delayed so that her reply would not come as a shock or that they had not given themselves over to worry for herself and her aunt and uncle.

Colonel Forster had returned to the Meryton garrison as a married man, which has been the focus of some speculation and surprise due to the young woman's age and family connections, but this has caused only a small ripple in the pool of social events and gossip in town.

Lydia complains constantly at being left behind and Kitty pines for your return—though I suspect it is only because you had promised to bring her some of that special ribbon she covets from

London.

“Indeed, I did,” Elizabeth murmured. She had forgotten entirely, which was also the likely reason that Jane had added that particular tidbit to the letter. It would not have been necessary if Elizabeth’s mind had not been quite so distracted of late.

Mama continues her lamentations in regards to the state of the number of suitors who appear at our door to ask after Kitty, who is more than old enough to have received at least one marriage proposal... But our poor mother’s nerves are in a knot as, more specifically, there are none to speak of.

Though we attend every ball and assembly and Kitty could not be pulled from the dance floor by a pack of howling hunting dogs, there has been nothing. I fear that she will soon prevail upon Colonel Forster’s young wife for an introduction to some of the better connected young officers within the militia.

I sincerely hope that this does not come to pass, but Mama is somewhat unpredictable in this arena.

Elizabeth could not imagine the chaos that reigned in the household while she had been away. Their mother seemed almost desperate to have one of her daughters married by the new year... but what lengths would she go to to accomplish such a thing? Surely, she would not do anything drastic...

We are all very eager to hear of your adventures in Derbyshire, and not least of all about the young man that Mrs. Gardiner told our mother about...

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. Of course her mother had conspired to put her in front of a young man on her perfectly innocent journey north. She would have to mention this deception to her aunt—Mrs. Gardiner had certainly had a plan when she had invited Elizabeth along on this visit. She was not sorry to have

disappointed them all—especially Mrs. Elliott who seemed even less interested in considering Elizabeth as a possible match for her son since her accident.

Elizabeth set down the paper with a sigh and rubbed her hands over her face.

For the first time in her life, she did not know how to respond to her sister's letter.

How could she explain falling through the ice? Or being rescued by the master of the neighboring estate? Elizabeth knew that she had to send some reassuring words home to Longbourn. She did not like to think of her family being worried for her safety. She pulled a piece of paper from the writing box and set out a quill and ink.

She could describe the storm, and the sleigh ride... the beautiful horses. And Pemberley— Yes. She could tell Jane all of those things.

She began to write, starting over several times before she was able to find the correct words.

A soft knock on the chamber door startled her and she frowned at the drops of ink that marred the page.

“Yes?” She could not keep the frustration from her voice as she crumpled the paper in her hand and pushed it away. She expected to see Alice's eager face in the doorway, but instead she was surprised once more to see George Elliott's familiar smile. Elizabeth's throat tightened but she kept her seat. She set down her quill and folded her hands in her lap.

“Mr. Elliott.”

“I have already told you, Miss Elizabeth, you may call me George,” he said.

“I confess I am not accustomed to being so informal, Mr. Elliott.”

“As you say.”

He stood there for a moment and Elizabeth blinked up at him. As though he had only just realized why he had interrupted her.

He put a hand into his pocket and drew out a stick of red sealing wax.

“For your letter,” he said.

Elizabeth smiled and rose from her chair. He remained in the doorway, mindful to stay out of her chamber.

“You are very kind,” Elizabeth teased him. “To risk your life yet again to help me to send a letter. Such gallantry.”

“One does what one can,” he said with a smile.

“I will be finished with my letter very soon,” Elizabeth said. “But I will not make you wait... I would not put your honor in jeopardy.”

George Elliott chuckled and shook his head. “It is only sealing wax,” he said. “Take what time you need to write your letter. My mother will be planning this dinner in earnest for some hours now. I fear she will drive Mrs. Spencer mad with her details.”

“Oh, yes... the salmon,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

George Elliott nodded gravely. “The salmon.”

“I am sure that Mr. Darcy will be very appreciative of her attention to such things,” Elizabeth laughed. The young man’s smile faded slightly, but enough that Elizabeth noticed.

“Indeed,” he replied. “I shall not keep you from your letters. And you may keep the sealing wax, I have placed a new one amid the chaos in my father’s study. With any luck he will be none the wiser until both of us have departed Grove House once more.”

Elizabeth was surprised to hear him say such a thing. “Departing?” she asked. “I was under the impression that you had returned to Grove House for the foreseeable future.”

George Elliott sighed. “That was, indeed, my mother’s assumption as well. But I cannot stay here. I am not yet ready to... settle.”

Elizabeth did not know how to respond, and the young man seemed embarrassed to have revealed so much to her. “I see,” she said. She understood his reservations, but did not feel that she could comfort him or offer any words of wisdom in such an arena.

Expectations were different for a son than they would be for a daughter, but the pressure was no less intense.

“George? George where have you gone?”

Mrs. Elliott’s voice echoed up the stairs and down the corridor and Elizabeth noticed the gentleman’s neck redden slightly.

“Excuse me, Miss Elizabeth,” he said stiffly. “It seems that I am required elsewhere most desperately.”

“Indeed you should not keep her waiting,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

George Elliott bowed briefly and turned away from the door. Elizabeth pushed it closed and let out a breath. It was clear to her that George Elliott was not ready for the life his mother expected of him, but it also seemed that he did not know what it might mean to reject such expectations outright. Grove House would be his someday, but what would happen if he did not want it?

Mrs. Elliott’s planning had been undertaken with all seriousness, and even the salmon she had demanded was delivered with a few hours to spare. Elizabeth had selected a pale gray gown for the occasion and was in the process of winding a bright blue velvet ribbon around her dark curls. Her reflection in the looking glass reassured her that she was on the mend—whatever illness had given her the fever and sweating she had experienced after her fall into the pond had run its course. Her appetite had returned and she was sleeping less during the day. Dr. Lighten had proclaimed her healthy, and despite her aunt’s worried expressions and Mrs. Elliott’s doubtful questions, the doctor’s pronouncement was the only reassurance she needed.

With her hair dressed and secured with a final pin, Elizabeth affixed a necklace bearing a single pear-shaped pearl around her

neck and smiled at her reflection. The gold chain fell delicately over her collarbones and the pearl rested just above the neckline of her gown. Simple and elegant.

The clock on the mantle chimed delicately and Elizabeth rose from her chair and looked out the window. The sun had just begun to set over the pine trees that lined the western edge of the estate and the sky was painted vibrantly pink and orange with the light of the setting sun. A small carriage pulled by two gray horses turned into the drive and Elizabeth felt her throat tighten just a little.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, Master of Pemberley.

The carriage stopped in the courtyard and a footman rushed into view to pull open the carriage door. Elizabeth's breath caught as, instead of the gentleman who had been invited, a small child leapt out of the carriage and swung on the hand of the footman who held the carriage door.

"What—"

Mr. Darcy stepped out of the carriage next and swept the little girl up into his arms.

"He has brought his daughter—" Elizabeth murmured. As though he could feel her eyes upon him, the gentleman looked up to the window. His dark eyes met and held hers and Elizabeth's heart beat a little faster in her chest. She had not expected him to be so—

A sharp knock on the door pulled her away from the window. The door opened quickly and Alice's frantic face appeared. "Miss Bennet, are you ready for supper? Mr. Darcy has arrived and Mrs. Elliott—"

"Yes. Yes, of course," Elizabeth said reassuringly. "I am ready." She waved the girl away and Alice retreated with a grateful smile upon her face.

Elizabeth sighed heavily and tried to fortify herself for the evening ahead. She had no doubt whatsoever that there would be a great deal of conversation that she would rather avoid, but she

hoped that she would be able to get a better sense of who this gentleman was, and perhaps understand his isolation a little better. The fact that he had brought his daughter lightened Elizabeth's heart somewhat. It was a very unexpected turn of events, and she was eager to see their hostess' reaction to such a change in their plans.

Elizabeth had never sat next to such a charming dinner guest

as Sophia Darcy. At five years old she was adorably precocious and took great pride in naming every item on the dinner table, including every dish that was served, twice. Once in English, and then again in relatively competent French.

Elizabeth delighted in every question that came from the girl's mouth and did her best to answer them as best she could. Though Mrs. Elliott watched their activities with a suspicious eyebrow raised, Sophia Darcy was well behaved and ate every morsel that was placed in front of her.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, however, was another matter entirely. He had been welcomed into the house warmly, and while Sophia had wriggled in his arms to be let down, he seemed happy to exchange pleasantries with his hosts. Wine was poured and Elizabeth was able to observe him from afar.

"Mr. Darcy, you really must be commended for your quick actions in coming to Miss Elizabeth's aid," Mrs. Elliott said with a sweet smile. "I fear she will never want to step foot upon a frozen surface ever again!"

"Really, Mrs. Elliott, you are too kind," Mr. Darcy replied. "I simply did what any man must do in such a situation. Action is the only answer when a life is in danger... When one is able to perform such an act, there is no other option."

That pronouncement was not made with any hint of pride or

boasting, but Elizabeth heard a soft snort of derision from George Elliott. She looked to Mr. Darcy quickly, her cheeks heating with embarrassment. She hoped that he had not heard the other gentleman's bitter exhalation, but it seemed that it had passed beneath his notice.

Elizabeth did not have a chance to speak to anyone in the parlor, nor was she able to taste her wine, for Miss Sophia Darcy had attached herself to Elizabeth's skirts almost immediately. It was not until they moved from warmth of the parlor and into the dining room that Elizabeth was able to realize the depth of George Elliott's apparent dislike for Grove House's neighbor.

Mr. Darcy, himself, also seemed to be aware of the younger man's animosity toward him, but chose not to address it. The conversation that flowed around the table was good-natured and uncomplicated and Elizabeth was entertained not only by the small child beside her, but also by the range of topics that were discussed.

Mrs. Gardiner was generous in her praise of Derbyshire and of how she missed the walks and cool air of the lake country, a sentiment which Mr. Darcy also echoed.

"I find that I am not quite myself when I am away from Pemberley," he said with a smile that Elizabeth believed held a hint of sadness. "It is here, on the estate, that I feel most alive, and most in touch with what matters most."

"Your business in London must keep you away from the estate longer than you should like," Mr. Elliott said briskly. "I, myself, feel very much the same. If I can avoid London, I do so very willingly." He clapped a hand against his son's back. "George cannot abide the country, is that not so?"

George Elliott smiled broadly at his father, but Elizabeth could see that the smile did not quite reach the young man's eyes. "On the contrary, Papa," he replied a little too loudly. "It is not that I do not enjoy the country—it is that I find after a very short amount of time that I have run out of activities to keep my mind

occupied... I feel that traveling abroad is the only way to keep a young man's sensibilities sharp." He looked to Mr. Darcy and a wry smile twisted the corner of his mouth. "Do you not agree, Mr. Darcy?"

Mr. Darcy took a sip of his wine and set the glass down upon the table purposefully. His long fingers lingered on the stem of the wineglass as he regarded George Elliott carefully. "I confess it has been quite some time since I was abroad from England," he said after a moment. "My late wife—she was enamored of travel and everything the continent and colonies had to offer. Now that she is gone, you will pardon me, I do not find the same joy in the strange delights to be found across the channel."

"Indeed," Mrs. Elliott. "I remember Mrs. Darcy very fondly." She looked to the little girl who was falling asleep in her chair beside Elizabeth and then back to Mr. Darcy. "Your Sophia looks just the image of her mother."

The comment was meant kindly, but Elizabeth saw a brief flash of pain cross the gentleman's face. Although it was quickly replaced with a smile and a kind murmur of thanks, Elizabeth could see that some damage had been done to Mr. Darcy's brave facade.

Before dessert was served, Mr. Darcy rose from his chair and lifted his sleeping daughter to his shoulder and carried her into the parlor. Elizabeth watched from the corner of her eye as he laid her upon the couch and pulled a woollen blanket over her sleeping form. The girl did not stir, and Elizabeth wondered what it would be like to have her own children at dinner parties much like this one—with the stern caveat that no inflammatory discussion would be tolerated in the presence of friends.

George Elliott had been drinking steadily all through supper, though he barely touched any of the meal, save for his mother's prized baked salmon. After Mr. Darcy's mention of his wife, Mrs. Elliott had done her best to steer the conversation away from such things, and instead guided them toward speaking of the estates in

the area, and what plans Mr. Darcy had for Pemberley for the spring and summer months.

Elizabeth had barely listened, preoccupied with the fact that she had still not been able to thank Mr. Darcy personally for rescuing her. But with the party otherwise occupied with the clearing of plates and the pouring of dessert wine, Elizabeth saw her opportunity to do just that.

She rose from her chair and laid her napkin upon the table.

“Are you quite well, Lizzy?” Mrs. Gardiner asked.

“Yes, indeed,” Elizabeth replied. “Supper was wonderful. Especially the salmon.” She smiled at Mrs. Elliott who inclined her head slightly. She knew the excellence of the dish and had been very purposeful in her demanding of it.

“I must take a turn about the room to be sure that I am ready for dessert,” Elizabeth continued.

“A wonderful idea,” Mrs. Elliott said with a sincere smile. “You have been abed for so many days, I do hope that you are not overwhelmed with the excitement of guests and the richness of the meal.”

Elizabeth was not deterred. She could still see Mr. Darcy in the parlor and did not want to lose her chance to speak with him. “I had feared that very thing myself, but I do feel very well, indeed.”

“Very well,” Mrs. Elliott said and dismissed her with a wave of her hand. Elizabeth smiled and left the room, but she could feel George Elliott’s eyes upon her as she walked through the doors the led from the dining room and into the parlor.

“Mr. Darcy, I—” she began, but he silenced her by placing a finger against his lips. Elizabeth flushed briefly as she remembered that his daughter was sleeping on the couch nearby. She smiled sheepishly and nodded. “Mr. Darcy, I wanted to thank you,” she said more softly.

“I am happy to see you so well, Miss Elizabeth,” the gentleman replied. “Dr. Lighten has kept me informed of your progress.”

Elizabeth was surprised at that. “Indeed? I had not realized.”

He appeared somewhat uncomfortable at her reaction. "It was not my intention to— That is I only wanted to know..."

Elizabeth smiled at his awkwardness and forgave him immediately. "I thank you for your care," she said. "I would not expect so selfless an act from a stranger."

"I could not stand idly by and wait for someone else to come to your aid," he said firmly. "They were too far away... there was no time to hesitate."

"I should have known better," Elizabeth said haltingly. "The weather was too strange to trust... I do not know what I was trying to prove. Perhaps I was attempting to convince myself that I was braver than I actually am."

Mr. Darcy came closer and smiled gently. "You were very brave, indeed," he said. "And your recovery was nothing short of miraculous. Dr. Lighten was very impressed."

Elizabeth felt her cheeks heating just a little and she felt the need to change the subject. She looked down at the sleeping form on the couch.

"Your daughter," she said. "Such a bright girl."

"She is most definitely precocious beyond her years... I do apologize if she commanded too much of your attention during supper."

Elizabeth smiled fondly at the little girl. "On the contrary, she was delightful and I enjoyed her company... Very much, indeed."

A smile broke over the gentleman's face and Elizabeth's chest tightened to see how fondly he looked at his child. "She has been very lonely at Pemberley. My sister, Georgiana, is away more often than I would like and I fear that she had grown tired of my company. I shall have to endure many questions about you when you depart for London."

Elizabeth smiled warmly and felt her cheeks warm as Mr. Darcy looked at her. She had enjoyed her short time with Sophia Darcy very much and would be sad to leave Derbyshire without saying goodbye. She suspected that seeing his daughter happy was a

different sort of joy for Mr. Darcy—and from his reaction, it seemed to be an unexpected one, as well.

“Elizabeth. Mr. Darcy, dessert is served!” the call from their hostess caused Mr. Darcy to frown and Elizabeth glanced down at the sleeping girl. She stirred briefly, but did not wake and Elizabeth smiled with relief.

“I really must thank you again,” Elizabeth said as they walked toward the doors that led to the dining room. Mrs. Elliott shifted in her chair to mark their progress and Elizabeth did her best not to feel self-conscious under her scrutiny.

“It is unnecessary,” Mr. Darcy said. “I could not have behaved in any other manner.” He paused briefly and looked into Elizabeth’s eyes. “I know now that I could not have lived with myself.”

Elizabeth’s chest tightened and she could not think of any words to reply...

“I—”

The musical chime of Mrs. Elliott’s small silver bell interrupted anything that Elizabeth might have said and Mr. Darcy turned to pull the doors that led to the parlor closed to keep some of the noise from reaching Sophia’s sleeping ears.

Elizabeth found her seat and felt her cheeks burning as George Elliott and his mother stared at her with equally heated glares. Mrs. Gardiner smiled as Elizabeth rejoined the table and reached across the table to squeeze her niece’s hand.

Servants bearing trays of flaming desserts and flagons of sweet wine entered the room as Mr. Darcy took his seat opposite Elizabeth. She met his eyes briefly and felt that same warmth spread through her chest as he smiled at her. From everything she had been told, the master of Pemberley was a cold, distant figure. But she could see none of that distance here tonight.

Dessert was as decadent and delightful as the supper had been, and Elizabeth wondered on several occasions if she would regret her decision to eat with such gusto. She was feeling better, but

there was no certainty that she was completely recovered from her illness.

But as she drank her sweet wine and looked at the gentleman from Pemberley's dark eyes across the candlelit table, she decided that she did not care.

It was very late when the dinner party ended and Mr. Darcy made his way to the front foyer with his daughter draped gently over his shoulder. Elizabeth reached up to drape the gentleman's coat over Sophia Darcy as she slept and her eyes met Mr. Darcy's once more as she tucked the fine wool coat around the girl's shoulders.

"Again, I am very happy to see you well, Miss Elizabeth," he said softly.

"And again, I have you to thank for it," Elizabeth replied. Mr. Darcy smiled down at and then George Elliott cleared his throat loudly.

"Mr. Darcy, you have been most welcome at Grove House. I do hope that you will come again to visit us," Mrs. Elliott said warmly, and though Mr. Darcy thanked her kindly, Elizabeth could hear a hint of sharpness in the other woman's voice.

Mr. Elliott mumbled something about Pemberley and its lake as he shook Mr. Darcy's hand, and Mr. Gardiner did the same before they walked away in the direction of the drawing room to partake of cigars and brandy.

"Do look after yourself, Darcy," George Elliott said as Mr. Darcy passed him. "It cannot be healthy for a gentleman to be trapped indoors with too many women for too long." The younger man's smile was sharp and pointed, but again, Mr. Darcy seemed not to notice.

“I thank you for your hospitality,” he said warmly. “You are welcome at Pemberley any time you wish.” Sophia stirred briefly on his shoulder, her dark lashes fluttering slightly as she cuddled closer to her father’s neck.

“Good evening, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said.

The gentleman smiled in response and bowed slightly, careful not to disturb his daughter any further before he turned to walk toward the waiting carriage.

George Elliott closed the front door with a careless hand before the footman had closed the carriage door, and Elizabeth gasped softly at his rudeness.

“One does tire of company...” he said casually and then walked down the hallway toward the drawing room. Elizabeth could already smell cigar and pipe smoke wafting from beneath the drawing room door.

“Indeed,” she whispered.

She could hear Mrs. Elliott and her aunt in the parlor and though she knew she was expected to join them, she could not bring herself to do so. She walked up the stairs to her bedchamber and stood in the window to watch Mr. Darcy’s carriage as it pulled out of the drive and disappeared into the darkness. She watched the shuddering light from the lanterns on the side of the carriage as they grew smaller and disappeared before she lit her candles and began to prepare for bed.

Now that the storm had run its course and spring had well and truly returned to Derbyshire, they were free to return to London—and to Longbourn, and Elizabeth could not disguise the fact that she was looking forward to seeing the familiar sights of Hertfordshire and smell the lavender that grew in Longbourn’s gardens once again.

Being away for so many weeks had made Elizabeth appreciate the simplicity of her life, and she longed for many things that she had come to take for granted. Even the shouting arguments of her younger sisters seemed preferable to the prolonged silences and

long stretches of empty time in Derbyshire.

There were many things about her time at Grove House that she would be happy to leave behind. But what she could not decide was whether or not she would be able to leave behind her curiosity, or her gratitude for one Fitzwilliam Darcy, Master of Pemberley; and her daring rescuer.

Their departure from Grove House a few days later was a tearful one, with Mrs. Gardiner promising several times that a return visit would be planned very soon.

“Perhaps you might come and spend Christmas here as we did so long ago,” Mrs. Elliott had begged. “Flora and the children will be here, and perhaps even my dear George will have an engagement to announce to add to our joy!”

Elizabeth had avoided George Elliott as best she could during her final days at Grove House, but he was almost unavoidable. She had answered his questions politely but did her best not to engage in extended conversation with him.

She had not liked the side of the young man that had been revealed at the Elliott’s dinner party. It had soured her opinion of George Elliott irreparably and though it pained her to see her aunt so melancholy, Elizabeth was glad that their time at Grove House had come to an end.

Mrs. Elliott had kissed her cheek briefly at their parting and Mr. Elliott had declared her ‘a delight,’ but Elizabeth could not help but suspect that they were disingenuous in their praise of her.

George Elliott had been absent from their departure, which suited Elizabeth very well, indeed. Though her relief was marred somewhat as the carriage pulled away from the house.

“Oh, Lizzy! Look!” Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed. “George did not forget to see us away!”

Elizabeth leaned forward reluctantly to peer out the carriage window.

Her eyes widened as she saw George Elliott astride one of the massive black Friesian horses. He rode it bareback, his hand gripping the horse's mane and his legs guiding it forward to run alongside the carriage. The horses who drew the carriage tossed their heads and whinnied as the large horse came level with them. The rider grinned broadly as he passed, and then galloped ahead and brought the huge beast to a stop at the head of the drive near a stand of oak trees that had just come into leaf.

Elizabeth had only a faint smile to offer in return for his display, but Mrs. Gardiner waved merrily as the young man removed his hat to salute them. The carriage turned onto the road and Elizabeth sat back against her seat with a small sigh.

"Have you ever known such a gallant young man," Mrs. Gardiner declared to no one in particular. Mr. Gardiner coughed through his reply but Elizabeth said nothing. She wondered, instead, if she would have felt differently if Mr. Darcy had been waiting on horseback to bid them farewell... and by the way her stomach twisted at the thought of him smiling at her with his daughter waving goodbye from the front of his saddle she knew that she would have preferred such a thing, and perhaps it would have been more difficult to leave Derbyshire had it been so.

“Lizzy, you will not believe what I have heard in town today,” Jane said as she came into the parlor where Elizabeth sat reading. Elizabeth had declined to walk into Meryton that morning and had enjoyed the peace and quiet of an empty house. The Meryton Assembly was only days away, and Lydia and Kitty would not cease in their demands to acquire new ribbons, fans, and

handkerchiefs for the event.

Of course, they would have to temper their expectations, and Elizabeth was grateful that she did not have to listen to such negotiations.

Elizabeth laid her book aside and smiled at her sister. The last six months had flowed swiftly by, but they had taken their toll upon Jane in subtle ways. Violet Kennedy's marriage to Mr. Brook had taken place in June, and there was rumor circling that she was *already* with child. And now another assembly approached and there had still been no sign that any of Jane's hopes would be realized. Even Kitty had received visits from one of the new Meryton officers, and Mrs. Bennet had high hopes that there would be a proposal of marriage before the winter clouds gathered over Hertfordshire.

"I am surprised to see you home so soon," she said. "What kind of excitement could bring you back from Meryton so swiftly?" Elizabeth asked brightly. It was rare to see Jane show any excitement in gossip, but there was something different about her delivery of this particular tidbit of information.

"Mary wanted to return home while Kitty and Lydia insisted upon staying with Mama... But Lizzy, the news. The news is most exciting! Netherfield Park is let at last," Jane declared with a smile.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and picked up her book once more. "And what is it about this rumor that makes you so interested? I did not think the addition of another neighbor would garner such attention. This news would be of more interest to Papa, but I daresay you must think of a different way to present it to him."

Jane groaned and sat down on the couch next to her sister. "It is not the letting that is of interest," she said. "But the occupant!"

"Indeed?"

"A gentleman from London who will be coming to Hertfordshire with two other gentlemen and three more ladies..."

"Far too many ladies," Elizabeth said as she opened her book

once more.

“Oh, Lizzy, you are entirely too jaded. How wonderful it will be to have new neighbors—they have already confirmed an invitation to the Meryton Assembly.”

“Are we so starved for entertainment that we are to be excited by such things?” Elizabeth sighed.

“Perhaps *I* am starved for such news,” Jane replied. “I am ever so tired of the never ending parade of new officers coming to the garrison. Each one of them is younger and more handsome than the last, but I confess that I am weary of looking at gentlemen in red coats with gold buttons. I long for a man in tailored vest and a dark coat with a top hat upon his head.”

“You should have come to Derbyshire,” Elizabeth said dryly. “There was no shortage of gentlemen in fine coats, riding fine horses, and saying fine things...”

“Lizzy, you are teasing me now,” Jane laughed. “And besides, you have described poor George Elliott in such a way that I shall not be able to look upon him without laughing.”

“If we have any manner of luck at all, you shall never have to test your fortitude in such an arena,” Elizabeth replied. She could keep the smile from her face no longer and collapsed against her sister and doubled over with laughter.

“Be serious now, Lizzy,” Jane gasped through her laughter. “Mama has been gathering information from her friends in Meryton, and I am certain that she will have more to tell us over supper.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I suppose this is a good thing,” she said.

Jane smiled reassuringly. “It will be some excitement to say the very least... and you know that Mama will send our father to welcome this mysterious gentleman to town as soon as he arrives.”

“I have no doubt of *that*,” Elizabeth said ruefully. “Knowing our Mama, she will have the gentleman’s income, and that of his guests, as well as the details of his estate memorized by sundown.”

Jane shook her head and smiled briefly. “Some things will

never change.”

A commotion in the foyer caused both girls to sigh as they heard their mother and younger sisters returning to the house.

Elizabeth set down her book and helped Jane to her feet. “Mama has certainly gathered her information quickly,” she said softly.

“It seems that you are correct in that assumption,” Jane replied.

“Lizzy! Lizzy, come at *once*! You simply will *not* believe what has happened!” Mrs. Bennet’s voice echoed down the hallway and Elizabeth exchanged a meaningful glance with her sister.

“Coming, Mama,” she replied.

Kitty rushed by with a paper wrapped package clutched to her chest and Lydia following close behind her. They thundered up the stairs like a pair of wild beasts and Elizabeth glared after them. It was too late to scold the youngest Bennet’s into remembering their manners, especially when it seemed that they had learned none in the first place.

If Kitty hoped to secure a marriage proposal, she would have to remember some kind of propriety. Elizabeth shook her head, she would have to remember to give Kitty some reminders about what her life would be like as the mistress of a household. Though she could hardly imagine her younger sisters as married women, it would happen someday—though she struggled with the very real possibility that such a thing would happen for them before it happened for her.

As Jane had predicted, Mrs. Bennet had discovered several things about the gentleman taking possession of Netherfield Park.

As the main course was served, Mrs. Bennet set down her fork and folded her hands upon the table. “His name... is Mr. Bingley,” she announced. “And he will take possession of Netherfield Park by

Michaelmas.”

“So soon?” Mr. Bennett observed quietly. Mrs. Bennet had clearly been expecting a different response and she fixed her husband with a stern glare.

“Indeed,” she said tersely. “And I have it on good authority that he is in possession of at least five thousand a year! What a wonderful thing for our girls!”

“My dear, how could this be a ‘wonderful’ thing?” Mr. Bennet asked. “The Meryton assembly is but a fortnight after his arrival—so much excitement cannot be healthy.”

Mrs. Bennet made a face. “Oh, Mr. Bennet, you are teasing me most cruelly!”

“Was there anything else, Mama?” Jane asked, obviously hoping to distract her mother from her distress at her husband’s teasing.

Their mother sniffed dramatically and picked up her fork. She stabbed it into the potatoes on her plate as though she would decline to reply, but then the burden of the gossip was too much to bear and she leaned forward once more. “He is coming to Netherfield Park in the company of his sisters, and two other gentlemen.”

“Still too many ladies,” Elizabeth observed quietly.

Mrs. Bennet chuckled at the comment. “One sister is a Mrs. Hurst, and her husband will accompany them as well, so you needn’t worry about *that*, Lizzy. I did not expect you to be concerned about competition.”

“Does Mr. Bingley like to dance, I wonder,” mused Lydia. “There is no use for a gentleman who will not dance!”

“I certainly agree, Lydia!” Mrs. Bennet declared. “However, Lady Lucas did tell me that she has learned more about the other gentleman accompanying them...”

“Is he married, too, Mama?” Kitty asked brightly.

“No, indeed,” Mrs. Bennet replied. “But Lady Lucas seemed somewhat confused. She told me that the gentleman is engaged to

be married—but she could say no more than that...”

“Most disappointing,” Mr. Bennet said. “Well, I fail to see how this news has been good for our girls, Mrs. Bennet, thus far it seems that there is only one gentleman in need of a wife—and it seems uncertain that he is in search of one at all!”

Mrs. Bennet laid down her utensils and crossed her arms over her chest as she glared over the table at her husband. “Mr. Bennet, if you cannot contain your disdain for my attempts to find good husbands for our girls, then I will thank you to take your supper elsewhere!”

Mr. Bennet picked up his napkin and dabbed at his mouth delicately. “I am happy to accept your offer, my dear,” he said with a brief smile. “Girls, I leave you in the capable hands of Hertfordshire’s most earnest matchmaker.”

He rose from his seat, winked at Elizabeth, and left the room at a brisk and unbothered pace.

“Your father is behaving most disagreeably this evening,” Mrs. Bennet muttered. “I daresay he will have much less to say when my plans begin to bear fruit.”

“Of course, Mama,” Kitty said quietly. “But Lydia is right... what if the gentleman will not dance? I do not mind dancing with officers, but it would be a pleasant change to dance with a gentleman—especially one from London. Do you think he will know our country dances, Lydia? It would be a shame if he did not.”

“I have every confidence in the world that Mr. Bingley is precisely the sort of gentleman who will be an asset to this community—and perhaps even this family,” Mrs. Bennet said with a smile.

Elizabeth looked down at her plate and found that she was wondering if Mr. Darcy was fond of dancing. And if he were, what would that matter?

But perhaps it did matter...

“F or the very *last* time, Lydia, Kitty will be

borrowing my fan for the assembly tonight,” Jane huffed, “not you. Do cease your moaning.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and tried not to laugh. Jane was so seldom angry or cross in any way, and her sternness was almost comical, but it would have done no good to giggle at her efforts. Lydia really *was* being difficult, and she deserved Jane’s ire.

“You are so unkind!” Lydia cried. “Ever since Mr. Atkinson came to visit Papa you have treated Kitty almost as well as you do Lizzy, and it is ever so unfair!”

Lydia pouted in her chair as Kitty rubbed her fingers over the borrowed fan. It was a lovely piece, with beautifully painted vellum panels and a polished bamboo handle and it was one of Jane’s precious possessions and Elizabeth was surprised to see her lending it out for such an event.

“I promise that I will be ever so careful with it,” Kitty said reverently.

“I know you will, Kitty,” Jane said with a small smile. “Now *do*, please, both of you, leave this room at once and finish dressing. The carriage will be here to collect us within the hour!”

Jane slid another pin into Elizabeth’s hair and rolled her eyes as their younger sisters left the room—Kitty holding the fan as though it were made of pure gold, and Lydia stomping angrily behind her.

“They will be arguing properly again in no time,” Elizabeth said soothingly.

“I know,” Jane sighed. “But at least it is quiet for the moment.”

“For the moment,” Elizabeth agreed. “But tell me, Jane, are you not excited for the assembly? You seem far too melancholy...” Elizabeth smiled at her sister in the looking glass and hoped that Jane would sense that she was teasing.

Jane sighed heavily and slid another pin into her sister’s dark curls. “I am, as yet, undecided. Although, I am looking forward to spending time with Charlotte Lucas and hearing Miss Kennedy’s news—”

“Mrs. Brook now,” Elizabeth reminded her gently.

“Yes, of course,” Jane replied.

“But this new gentleman,” Elizabeth said by way of changing the subject. “Mr. Bingley. Has there been any more news of him?”

Jane frowned slightly. It had been more than a fortnight since the gentleman’s arrival in Meryton, and Mrs. Bennet had harangued her husband almost daily to visit Netherfield Park and welcome Mr. Bingley to their society.

Elizabeth had a sneaking suspicion that their father had already done precisely that, but was waiting for his wife to stop asking him about it—something which would never occur.

They could both be equally, and painfully, stubborn at times.

“No other news aside from the fact that every gentleman in Hertfordshire in possession of daughters of marriageable age will have descended upon Netherfield Park to make their greetings and acquaintance. Why, Sir William Lucas called upon them not two days after their arrival!”

Elizabeth blinked at her sister incredulously. “So soon?” she gasped.

It was well known that Charlotte Lucas was nearing an age where marriage would seem to be beyond her reach, but such eagerness could be misconstrued as desperation—no matter how well intentioned.

Jane nodded and tucked the edge of the pale pink velvet ribbon through the curl she had just secured and placed a final pin to hold it in place. “You are ready,” she said with a smile.

“I suppose we should be looking to Kitty’s prospects,” Elizabeth said with a sigh as she rose from the vanity chair. She kissed Jane’s cheek and went to the wardrobe to pull out the gown she had planned to wear for the assembly. She had been fond of pale pinks lately—the color of a cherry blossom in the spring sunshine—they reminded her of Longbourn’s gardens and also, quite by accident, of her time in Derbyshire.

“It would seem so,” Jane said. “Mr. Atkinson has been to Longbourn to speak with Papa, and I daresay he will dance with Kitty for much of the evening tonight. We should be able to expect an engagement very soon.”

“How strange to think that Kitty should find a husband before her elder sisters,” Elizabeth mused. She did not look over her shoulder to see Jane’s expression, but she knew at once that she should have kept her observation to herself.

“Indeed,” Jane said after a moment.

“Jane—I did not mean...” Elizabeth began as she came out from behind the wardrobe door.

“It matters not,” Jane replied with a smile. “Kitty has found her luck, and I know in my heart that I shall find mine. Just as you shall... we must be patient and hope that we may have as much happiness as Kitty and Miss Kennedy.”

Elizabeth smiled, thankful that Jane had chosen to find a positive way to look at this situation. “I believe the same.”

She grabbed her sister’s hands and held them lightly. “We shall endeavor to have a wonderful time tonight,” she said.

Jane smiled and squeezed Elizabeth’s fingers. “We shall, indeed.”

After many complaints, more arguments over who was wearing what, and whether or not Mary should come at all, the Bennet sisters were finally able to clamber into the carriage and depart for Meryton.

Charlotte Lucas was standing at the edge of the assembly hall. She held a glass of rum punch and looked decidedly uninterested in everything that was happening. However, as soon as she saw Jane and Elizabeth her mood seemed to brighten immediately.

“Lizzy, Jane, I am so very pleased to see you,” she greeted them warmly.

Lydia and Kitty pushed past them on the way to the dance floor and Charlotte smiled as she watched them. “Always eager to dance,” she laughed.

“Always eager to be the center of attention,” Elizabeth agreed.

“I have been so eager for your arrival,” Charlotte said and Elizabeth felt a smile creep across her face. Though she pretended not to be, and much like her mother, Charlotte was fond of gossip and she was uniquely positioned in Meryton’s society to hear many things that Elizabeth and Jane would not otherwise be privy to.

Charlotte waited while Elizabeth and Jane helped themselves to some punch from the long banquet tables and Elizabeth noticed that Mary had taken up her usual position near the musicians so she could watch the pianist at work. Elizabeth was certain that Mary would eventually become engaged to a gentleman with an affinity for music, but there was no telling when her sister would allow such a thing to happen...

Lydia and Kitty spun around the dance floor on the arms of two handsome soldiers she did not recognize, and Mrs. Bennet was already embroiled in discussion with her friends.

“Charlotte, what is it?” Jane asked with a smile upon her face. “You seem very eager to reveal your secrets tonight.”

“The talk around Meryton is simply too good to keep to

myself," Charlotte replied. "Papa went to visit Mr. Bingley some weeks ago," she began. "He is is exceedingly gentlemanlike, and has a pleasant countenance. He arrived at the assembly with his sisters and two other gentleman not long ago—from what I have observed, he has a very unaffected manner to him, and is very quick to smile... a trait not often found in gentlemen of his station."

"Really, Charlotte," Jane laughed. "Are all gentleman in possession of a good fortune joyless creatures with no cause to smile?"

"I would not know," Charlotte replied with a smile of her own. "But it might explain the frown upon the face of the other young man who accompanied him."

"And his sisters?" Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte lifted her glass of punch in the vague direction of two women that Elizabeth did not recognize. "Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst... they are fine women, with an air of decided fashion. Almost overdressed for such a gathering..."

"Charlotte you are keeping something from us," Jane said.

"I am, indeed," Charlotte confirmed. "But there is more discussion swirling through Meryton about another gentleman... He is rumored to be a great friend of Mr. Bingley's. And the fact that he has a grand estate and an income of more than ten thousand a year... why, some of the ladies have even said that he is handsomer than Mr. Bingley."

"A good income can be a remarkable aphrodisiac," Elizabeth murmured as she scanned the crowd for unfamiliar faces.

"Mr. Bingley has done very well to make himself acquainted with all the principal people in the room," Charlotte continued. "He has been very agreeable and danced every dance, and has even talked of giving a ball of his own at Netherfield."

Elizabeth laughed shortly and took a drink of her punch. It was very strong, and she resolved to only have a few glasses, and very sparingly. "He has only been in town a short while and is already

planning his own society functions... how very strange.”

“A welcome kind of strangeness,” Jane said softly. Elizabeth could see that she had located the gentleman in question and was considering him carefully. He was fair, and handsome in his own way; but his looks were not to Elizabeth’s tastes. Jane, however, seemed entranced.

“And what of his friend?” Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte raised an eyebrow and shook her head. “His friend, I regret to inform you, is not nearly the gentleman Mr. Bingley seems to be. He has danced only once with Mrs. Hurst, and once with Miss Bingley... and has declined to be introduced to any other lady... He has kept very much to his own company and has spoken to almost no one else. Very disagreeable. He is handsome, to be sure, but his manners leave much to be desired.”

“You are a wealth of information this evening,” Elizabeth said dryly. Charlotte flushed prettily, but did not make any attempt to deny that she had more to say.

“There are other rumors surrounding this gentleman,” Charlotte said quietly. “He has been marred by tragedy... he was married. Five years ago his wife died of a terrible illness. There is no doubt in my mind that his aloof and cold disposition is due in part to this wound...”

“How terrible,” Jane murmured, but it was clear that her sister’s mind and focus was on other things. Elizabeth, however, was extremely interested in her friend’s words.

“Indeed,” she said. “Very tragic.” There was something familiar about this story, though it could not have been unique to one particular gentleman....

Jane excused herself quietly to walk toward the dance floor, and Charlotte sighed and took a sip of her neglected punch. “There is no need to despair, Lizzy, I have it on good authority that the gentleman is already engaged to be married.”

“Indeed?” Elizabeth said.

“I do not assume that a gentleman with so great an income

would remain unattached for so long,” Charlotte observed. “Even the fact that he has a young daughter did not deter this engagement. But if my mother is correct, this marriage will be in name only—”

“And how does one assume such a thing?” Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte leaned closer to give her answer and Elizabeth bent her head to hear her friend’s whispered words more clearly. “The young woman in question is a sickly creature,” Charlotte replied softly. “Mother does not believe that she would survive the childbed... but a gentleman in possession of a goodly fortune, and no wife to share it or care for his child—I am sure it is a marriage of convenience only.”

“I see,” Elizabeth said. She was certain that Charlotte’s story sounded far too familiar for comfort.

“And where is this gentleman’s estate?” she asked. But Charlotte did not seem to hear her question. Instead, she gasped and pointed to the dance floor.

“Lizzy! Look! Jane is dancing with Mr. Bingley!”

Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open in surprise to see her sister taking her place across from Mr. Bingley for the start of a new dance. And here she was, gossiping with Charlotte while the rest of her sisters enjoyed the assembly in their own ways. Elizabeth had come to dance and reconnect with her friends. As much as she loved Charlotte, she had not planned to stand in one place all evening.

Unfortunately, when she apologized to Charlotte and left her side, Elizabeth had been obliged, by the scarcity of gentlemen, to sit down for two dances. During her quiet moments while watching the dancing, Elizabeth had been pondering Charlotte’s words. Her description of Mr. Bingley’s friend was very like someone she believed she had met—but it could not be possible.

Jane had moved on to another dancing partner, a slender young man who seemed uncomfortable in his officer’s jacket, but Elizabeth could see that her sister’s eyes returned often to the

gentleman standing nearby.

While Elizabeth waited for a lull in the dancing, she had been positioned in such a way as to overhear a conversation between Mr. Bingley and his friend, whose identity she still had not discovered.

“Come now,” said Mr. Bingley, “I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about by yourself looking so forlorn. I did not invite you here to watch you frown in the first polite company you have experienced in months. You had much better dance.”

The other man shook his head. “I certainly shall not,” he replied. “You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. At such an assembly as this it would be insupportable. Your sisters are engaged, and there is not another woman in the room whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with.”

Elizabeth lifted a hand to her lips to hide her smile. She knew she should not have been listening, but she could not prevent it. It was very rare that she could overhear gentlemen speaking to each other when they believed no one else was listening.

“I would not be so fastidious as you are,” said Mr. Bingley, “Not for a kingdom! Upon my honour, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life as I have this evening; and there are several of them that are uncommonly pretty.”

“You, my friend, have been dancing with the only handsome girl in the room,” said the other gentleman dryly.

Elizabeth glanced over at the pair and saw a genuine smile break over Mr. Bingley’s handsome face. “Oh! She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld! But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you, who is very pretty, and I dare say very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you.”

Elizabeth looked away quickly and felt a hot blush flood her cheeks. They were speaking of her now... this could not end in anything but disaster...

“Which do you mean?” said the gentleman.

Without meaning to, Elizabeth dared to glance back at the pair, and in doing so caught the gentleman's eye.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley.

"Oh!" Elizabeth whispered and she stood up slowly from her chair. She had thought of what she would do when she saw him again, if she did ever see him again, but she had not expected a meeting such as this.

A flare of recognition came over the gentleman's face and he looked to his friend. "But I know this young lady, Bingley. She is Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

"I am all astonishment," Mr. Bingley cried. "Come then, you must have a dance. You cannot argue as you are already acquainted with your partner. Come..." He walked briskly to where Elizabeth stood and bowed neatly.

"Miss Bennet, I must apologize for this, but my dear friend has revealed that in this crowd of strangers that he has some acquaintance with you."

"Indeed," Elizabeth replied. "I was pleased to meet Mr. Darcy under very strange circumstances while visiting Derbyshire with my aunt and uncle some months ago."

"An unexpected happiness, then," Mr. Bingley said brightly. "Do you dance, Miss Bennet?" he asked.

"I do, when there are enough partners to be had," she replied. Mr. Darcy's dark eyes held hers gently and Elizabeth could feel the blush in her cheeks warming once more. The musicians played the final notes of the dance and behind them, the dancers bowed to their partners and began to take positions for the next dance.

"Then I daresay this is the perfect moment," Mr. Bingley said he smiled brilliantly and walked away swiftly in the direction of the dancers, no doubt looking to partner with Jane once more.

"I must confess, I am not much for dancing," Mr. Darcy said quietly, "but if you would do me the honor—"

Elizabeth smiled. "I would be delighted, Mr. Darcy," she replied.

They walked together to the dance floor and took up their positions. Elizabeth did her best to ignore the stares and whispers of her friends and neighbors. They would have all, by now, heard the news of Mr. Darcy's income, and his particular family tragedies... but to see that the wealthiest gentlemen in the room had chosen the two eldest Bennet girls to pay their attentions to? Most uncommon, indeed. She could not see her mother, but Elizabeth had no doubt that she would call this moment one of her proudest.

"I had not expected to see you in Hertfordshire," Elizabeth said as the dance began.

"I did not expect to come to Hertfordshire," Mr. Darcy admitted. "But I could not refuse the invitation."

Elizabeth could not say that she was glad for it, but she was. She had been thinking about Mr. Darcy for the better part of six months... and now here he was, and she could think of nothing to say. But the way she felt as she looked at him was not helping—and yet, what Charlotte had said about him made her pause.

"I have heard that I should be offering my congratulations to you," she blurted out.

Mr. Darcy appeared confused but waited several steps before answering, "Indeed? On what occasion?"

"Your engagement," Elizabeth said haltingly. She wondered briefly if Charlotte's information had been incorrect and that she had somehow made a fool of herself. *Why had she said such a thing? Why could she not ask how he was enjoying his time in Hertfordshire or Meryton? Why had she not asked after Sophia's health?*

Mr. Darcy raised an eyebrow. "My engagement..."

"I do apologize," Elizabeth said swiftly. "I should not have—"

Mr. Darcy shook his head and took her hand for another step in the dance. "There is no need to apologize. I realize that gossip must be sweeping through Meryton at alarming speeds."

Elizabeth did not reply and tried to focus on her steps.

"I am, unfortunately, not engaged—though there are certain

parties who would wish that I were.”

“I see,” Elizabeth said quietly. She did not know what she should say. *Was she happy to have Charlotte’s gossip refuted? Or should she have been disappointed on the gentleman’s behalf...*

Above anything else, Elizabeth was somewhat embarrassed that she had spoken of it in the first place. But there was also a twinge of doubt—why should he tell her the truth. It was a private thing that he should not have to discuss with anyone he did not want to. Yes, they were acquainted, but certainly not well enough to reveal such things.

“I do apologize,” she said as they came together again for another four steps.

“There is no need,” he said with a brief smile. “Sophia has asked about you.”

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warm again. “Has she? I have thought about her quite often since leaving Derbyshire.”

“She is here with me at Netherfield Park,” he said before they parted again and took their places across from one another for the final bars of the dance. Mr. Darcy bowed and Elizabeth curtsied and the room broke out in applause as the dancers finished.

Elizabeth clapped her gloved hands and smiled at Mr. Darcy. *It would be wonderful to see Sophia again.*

She took Mr. Darcy’s outstretched hand and allowed him to lead her to the edge of the dance floor. “I know that Sophia would very much like to see you, if you would be amenable to a visit?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Of course... Of course, I would be very glad to visit—”

“Lizzy! Lizzy you must come and see who is here!”

Elizabeth groaned inwardly as her mother pushed her way through the crowd. She had kept her meeting with Mr. Darcy relatively quiet and had explained very little of her ordeal to her family—Mrs. Gardiner had also made a promise to keep the severity of the incident a secret, and Elizabeth was more than grateful for her aunt’s silence.

However, Mrs. Bennet *had* heard the gossip that had been circling the assembly, and from the smile upon her face, she knew precisely how much income Elizabeth's dancing partner had to his name and quite possibly the name of his estate in Derbyshire, as well.

"Mama," Elizabeth said as her mother approached. "This is—"

But her introduction of the gentleman at her side was cut short as she saw the gentleman walking behind Mrs. Bennet.

George Elliott.

But what was he doing in Hertfordshire?

The young man's smile brought back all of the feelings about

him that Elizabeth had tried to forget when they had departed Grove House six months ago. In that time, her opinion of him had not changed.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet," he greeted her warmly. "I was just in London and had the pleasure of visiting with your aunt and uncle who told me that I could not properly appreciate the southern countryside without visiting Hertfordshire."

Mrs. Bennet tapped her daughter's arm in admonishment. "Lizzy, I am absolutely bereft that you did not tell me what a *delight* Mr. Elliott is!"

"I am sorry, Mama," Elizabeth said quietly and then she met George Elliott's gaze. "Mr. Elliott, you are most welcome to Hertfordshire, and to have come just in time to experience the assembly—how serendipitous."

"Indeed," George Elliott agreed with a smile. "I do so love a country dance, and it has been an age since I last attended one of this calibre."

"I believe you remember Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said, but as she looked over her shoulder to where the gentleman had stood, she found that she was alone.

George Elliott chuckled and shook his head. "I believe Mr. Darcy has abandoned you, Miss Elizabeth. But do not despair, I shall take his place with you upon the dance floor."

Elizabeth looked desperately at her mother, but Mrs. Bennett nodded eagerly and almost pushed her daughter at the young man. "Go and dance, Lizzy," she cried happily.

There was no argument to be made, and though Elizabeth looked for Mr. Darcy in the crowd, he was nowhere to be seen. Jane was paired with Mr. Bingley once again and she caught her sister's surprised glance as she took her place among the other dancers with Mr. Elliott beside her.

Elizabeth was confused, but she did her best to keep that emotion concealed as the dance began. As she had been with Mr. Darcy, she was surprised to see George Elliott, but where she had been pleased to see Mr. Darcy, she was entirely unhappy to be trapped with this particular gentleman for the duration of the dance.

"It has been quite some time since your departure from Derbyshire," George Elliott said with a smile.

"Six months," Elizabeth replied, "yes."

"I must confess that I have labored long over my feelings surrounding your presence at Grove House," he said conversationally.

Elizabeth's eyes widened slightly. *Whatever could he be planning?*

"And I have found that I have been pondering my mother's wish that I find a suitable bride at the same time."

Elizabeth's throat tightened painfully as she tried desperately to keep herself calm.

"I see," she managed to choke out. She turned away from him, following the steps of the dance and locked eyes with Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy where he stood at the side of the room. He was speaking to Colonel Forster, but seemed entirely distracted from the conversation.

"I can only hope that you have spent these last six months in a similar frame of mind." George Elliott looked at her meaningfully and Elizabeth had to turn her head quickly to break the intensity of

his gaze.

Elizabeth could not reply as the dance moved her away from the gentleman, and she was grateful for it. *How could she reply to such a thing?*

She *had* spent the last six months thinking about a certain gentleman from Derbyshire, but she had not been thinking of him, and she doubted if he would appreciate that fact.

"I have been to Longbourn to visit your father," he said as they came together again for the end of the dance. "And I must say he is a delightful sort of gentleman."

Elizabeth bit back her surprised response. *How would her father feel to be labeled as such? It is certainly not how he would describe himself.*

"I confess I do not know what to say," Elizabeth finally managed to choke out.

"I can see that you are surprised by my arrival," George Elliott said with a smile. He bowed to her as the dance ended and Elizabeth struggled to curtsy properly. "I would have thought that your aunt would have written to tell you of my impending visit."

"Indeed, I was uninformed," Elizabeth said tersely. She had received a letter from her aunt not a week before, but she had mentioned nothing about George Elliott or his impending arrival. *Had Mrs. Gardiner and her mother been plotting this meeting without her knowledge?*

"Well, pleasant surprises are always the very best kind," he said briskly, as though he had already presumed her what her reaction might be. What young woman would not be flattered and happily surprised by the attentions of a handsome young gentleman with a dashing and exciting personality, a good fortune and a grand estate to his name?

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and scanned the crowd of guests for her mother. She would have stern words for her when the assembly was over.

"And where are you staying while you are in Meryton, Mr.

Elliott?" she asked to try and diffuse the situation.

"At the White Horse," he said briskly. "A decent enough inn, though I daresay their breakfasts leave something to be desired."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. *How long had he been in town? And when had he come to visit her father?* She did not like how this was progressing in the slightest.

"Indeed, had we known you were coming, I am certain something else could have been arranged," Elizabeth said.

"You needn't worry, Miss Elizabeth, Sir William has been kind enough to offer me a room at Lucas Lodge, which I will likely accept if it seems that I will be staying longer in Meryton."

"Indeed," Elizabeth said quietly. "If you will excuse me, I must speak to my sister." She turned away, hoping to find Jane and try to make sense of what was happening, but George Elliott's heavy hand gripped her wrist suddenly. Elizabeth looked back at him in surprise.

George Elliott's blue eyes were intensely bright as he looked at her. "I do hope that you will think on what I have said, Miss Elizabeth," he said gravely.

"I shall," Elizabeth whispered and then pulled her arm away and walked quickly through the crowd.

He had not made any kind of formal proposal, but it was very clear to her that such a thing was his intent. Elizabeth could think of nothing she wanted less than to be tied to Mr. George Elliott for any length of time.

Elizabeth wound her way through the guests who crowded toward the dance floor and around the banquet tables. Charlotte Lucas waved her over, but Elizabeth could not stomach the thought of having to explain the fact that she had danced with the mysteriously tragic Mr. Darcy, and a new gentleman who Charlotte would no doubt want to know everything about. She would discover everything for herself if George Elliott took her father's offer of a room at Lucas Lodge.

Jane was nowhere to be found, and she only barely avoided

her mother as she came to the double doors that led out of the assembly hall and out to the courtyard.

Perhaps some fresh air would help her clear her head.

She stepped out into the night and wrapped her arms around her torso against the cold. She regretted not bringing her shawl for only a moment, but then the chill air that nipped at her cheeks became a welcome reprieve from the heat of the assembly hall.

Torches and lanterns lit the courtyard and Elizabeth could see the outline of carriages and the low murmur of conversation as the drivers loitered in the shadows to await their instructions.

Elizabeth looked up at the clouded sky and tried to sort through her anxious and confused feelings. She was thrilled to see Mr. Darcy again, and she was truly looking forward to spending time with Sophia... But seeing George Elliott had brought back every negative emotion she had felt when she had been in Derbyshire. His presumptuous appearance and entitled approach to her at the assembly had only confirmed everything she had felt about him from the beginning.

And the betrayal she felt at knowing that her family had known of his arrival—and that her father had spoken to him and said nothing to her?

She refused to believe that such a thing could be possible. Her father would never agree to anything, especially an offer of marriage without speaking to her first. She had never mentioned George Elliott to him...

But what if the young man was lying about seeing her father. It was one thing for Mrs. Bennet to become excited about something or someone, but entirely another for her husband to agree to anything. If he had truly been announced by letter or introduced by Mr. Gardiner, it would stand to reason that George Elliott would be staying at Longbourn during his time in Hertfordshire... but the fact that he was staying in town at the White Horse meant something else entirely.

Perhaps George Elliott meant to secure her favor before

approaching her father—a tactic which was certain to have worked favorably for other young men in the past. But Mr. Bennet would be in no hurry to see Elizabeth married away from the family, of that Elizabeth was certain.

She glared up at the brightly lit windows of the assembly hall. She now had no doubt that her mother was up to something—and that George Elliott featured in her plans. This would not do. Not at all.

As she stood outside, shivering in the cold, Elizabeth Bennet made a promise to herself. She would not bend to the will of others when it came to matters of her own heart. Her mother might have been desperate to see her daughters married and in households of their own, but Elizabeth was in no rush for such things. Especially when there were other forces working to ensure that her choices were limited in number. If she were of a different disposition, perhaps the prospect of having a husband like George Elliott would be a preferable one... But Elizabeth could not change who she was, and there was nothing that could be done to transform George Elliott into the partner that she would desire for her life.

Thusly resolved, Elizabeth returned to the assembly hall and helped herself to a glass of punch. She stood in the window and looked out at the courtyard instead of paying attention to the guests, and as she did so, she watched as the first flakes of snow began to fall on the darkened ground.

“An early winter,” a quiet voice said behind her.

“So it would seem,” Elizabeth answered without taking her eyes off the window. She raised her eyes to the reflection in the window glass and her eyes widened to see the familiar face of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy looking back at her.

“Mr. Darcy,” she said in surprise as she turned toward him. He took the empty glass of punch from her hand and replaced it with a fresh one.

“I do hope you are enjoying the evening,” he said.

“I—” Elizabeth’s voice faltered for just a moment. She wanted

to be honest with him; wanted to tell him that she was having an abysmal time and that she only wanted to return to Longbourn and never speak to any of these people or listen to any gossip ever again, but she could not. "I am, I thank you," she replied instead.

The gentleman smiled briefly, as though he could hear her thoughts, but he said nothing.

"How long do you plan to stay in Hertfordshire?" Elizabeth asked suddenly.

"At least until after Christmas," he replied. "Sophia is ever so eager to experience the holiday somewhere other than Pemberley. She has talked of nothing else since our departure from Derbyshire."

"How delightful," Elizabeth said honestly. "There is a great deal of activity in Meryton during the holidays, I am certain that she will find excitement in everything."

"If it has already begun to snow, I daresay we shall all have a merry holiday," he observed. "Christmas is nothing without snow."

"Indeed, I must agree," Elizabeth said with a smile. "It has been a rare year for strange weather."

"Indeed," Mr. Darcy agreed with a low chuckle that made Elizabeth's cheeks warm slightly.

She was about to say something more when Mrs. Bennet appeared through the crowd and laid her hand upon her daughter's shoulder. "Do excuse me," she said. "Lizzy, I must speak to you quite urgently—"

"Mama, this is Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said, embarrassed by her mother's interruption. "I was pleased to make his acquaintance in Derbyshire when I was visiting Grove House with my aunt and uncle." Elizabeth had hoped her explanation would prepare her mother to change whatever she had been planning to say, but Mrs. Bennet seemed unbothered by this information as Mr. Darcy bowed to her.

"Mr. Darcy, how wonderful to meet you. You are to be

congratulated upon your engagement. The de Bourgh's are a very fine family... why, my dear husband's cousin is parson to Lady Catherine herself."

"Indeed," Mr. Darcy said quietly.

"If you will be so kind as to excuse us," Mrs. Bennet said with a smile that Elizabeth knew was meant to be condescending. Her cheeks now burned with embarrassment as Mr. Darcy bowed and her mother pulled her away from the window.

"There is no sense in being sociable with a gentleman who is already engaged to be married! And to such a young lady." Mrs. Bennet complained bitterly. "There is a gentleman very near to Mr. Darcy both in wealth and in possession of a much more amiable character... and there is no tragedy following in his wake."

"But, Mama," Elizabeth spluttered. "He is not engaged at all... and Sophia Darcy is a delight—"

"I will hear no more of it," Mrs. Bennet said. "Mr. Elliott is a very suitable young man and you *will* speak with him."

"Mama—"

"Jane has stood up to dance with Mr. Bingley almost four times this evening, *four* times! And Kitty has been upon the arm of Mr. Atkinson for twice as many dances. I daresay that there will be *two* marriage proposals for your Papa to negotiate, and if there is any luck left at all, perhaps there will be three!"

Elizabeth gritted her teeth at her mother's words, but there was nothing she could say as she was led through the crowd to where George Elliott stood among Mrs. Bennet's friends. She could already hear that he was in the midst of a story he had already told at Grove House, and she did not relish hearing it again.

She looked over her shoulder to where she had left Mr. Darcy, but the gentleman had disappeared into the crowd. Elizabeth felt a pang of regret at how she had been taken away, and knew that she would have to find a way to make up for it. She wanted to speak to him again, to ask him about Pemberley, and enquire after Sophia's well-being... just being in his company was different to any other

gentleman she had an acquaintance with. He was unlike anyone she had ever met, and it felt most unfair to have to be subjected to the company of a young man she despised so utterly.

“Ah, Miss Elizabeth,” George Elliott said as they approached. “I have just been telling Lady Lucas about the Friesian horses that I purchased in Belgium...”

“A most exciting story, indeed!” Lady Lucas exclaimed.

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said quietly.

George Elliott smiled his charming smile and continued his story, but Elizabeth was not listening, and no one seemed to notice her distraction. Instead of smiling in appreciation of George Elliott’s story, she wondered what little Sophia Darcy would wish for for Christmas... and if she could make something for the little girl before the festive season arrived. She would have to find some reason to travel to Netherfield Park, and hoped that Jane’s acquaintance with Mr. Bingley could provide that opportunity... It seemed somewhat disingenuous to hope for such a thing to happen, but Elizabeth could think of no other way that it could be accomplished.

All she wanted was for the assembly to be over so that she could speak to Jane about everything that had happened, and devise some way to disentangle herself from the charming web that George Elliott had spun around her family.

Much to Elizabeth's relief, George Elliott did not stay long

in Hertfordshire, but that did not stop him from visiting Longbourn no less than three times. Each time Elizabeth did her best to find reasons not to stay in his company overlong, but Mrs. Bennet seemed to be aware of every excuse and somehow managed to foil each of Elizabeth's attempts to avoid being alone with the gentleman.

On his third and final visit, George Elliott was sent into the parlor where Elizabeth was reading and watching the snow fall upon Longbourn's gardens.

"Mary, I need you in the drawing room," Mrs. Bennet announced loudly as she showed Mr. Elliott in.

Mary looked up from her pianoforte music in annoyance. "But, Mama—"

"I will take no arguments, child," Mrs. Bennet said shrilly, come at once."

Mary gave her elder sister a pitying look and then did as she had been bidden. George Elliott smiled broadly at Mary as she left and then entered the room at a brisk pace as though he were quite at ease with the situation.

He took a seat opposite Elizabeth who laid her book in her lap and looked at him expectantly. She was tired of her mother's machinations, and was looking forward to the gentleman's departure from Hertfordshire—whenever that might be, it could

not be soon enough.

Jane had been invited to Netherfield Park for tea, and Elizabeth had been focused on that rather than what she might say in reply to whatever Mr. George Elliott might have to say to her.

“You know, Miss Elizabeth, that I have labored long over finding a bride who would please both my mother and father...”

Elizabeth smiled stiffly, remembering Mrs. Elliott’s stern judgements over her own failings. “Indeed, your mother did set a very strict standard. It cannot be easy to find a young woman so perfectly matched to all of her requirements.”

She did not mention the fact that she was certain Mrs. Elliott had made such a list because no such young woman could ever exist...

George Elliott could have been insulted, but instead he laughed at her observation. “You are quite correct, Miss Elizabeth,” he said. “Which is why I have decided that I should please myself with the decision of whom I am to marry, and not my dear mama.”

Elizabeth blinked at him in surprise.

George Elliott shifted in his seat and leaned upon his knee to look at her with a serious expression upon his face. “I have been told that you have had no marriage proposals,” he said boldly. “It this incorrect?”

“I— That is to say—” Elizabeth stammered.

“I had thought not. Forgive me for saying so, Miss Elizabeth, but you do not strike me as a young woman who would not enjoy a happy life as the wife of a garrison officer.”

Elizabeth’s words were frozen in her throat. He presumed far too much, but she could not escape or tell him to leave.

“You, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, are destined for something different. You are witty, and courageous—though my mother would disagree. And you are better suited to the life of a country gentleman’s wife. To run a household and face those challenges instead of pining after some dark eyed fool in a red coat with gold braid.”

“I—”

“Come now, Miss Elizabeth, we both know that you will not receive such a proposal while under your father’s roof. Perhaps if you were to go to London to live with your aunt and uncle your circumstance might change, but I do not believe that has been presented as an option.”

Elizabeth could do nothing but stare at the pompous young man and despise everything about him. From the carefully arranged curl of his hair, to the expensive tailoring of his coat, she despised him.

Presumptuous. Rude. Arrogant.

“I confess I do not know what to say,” she finally managed to stammer.

“You will agree, of course,” he said. “And if you accept my proposal, I promise that I shall make you a contented wife. You will see me only a few times a year as I pursue my interests and business contacts abroad and in the colonies, but I have no doubt that you will keep Grove House, and my dear mother, under a firm hand.”

Elizabeth shook her head, unable to believe what she had heard.

“I do not require an answer now,” he said. “No doubt you have much to consider.” He rose from his seat and grabbed hold of Elizabeth’s hand. He pressed his lips against her cold knuckles in what should have been a kiss that sent her heart pounding, but the contact of his lips only made her stomach lurch sickly.

“I do, indeed,” she said quietly.

“I shall take my leave of Hertfordshire in the morning, my father has requested my return to Grove House before the roads become too unmanageable in the winter weather. But I shall return before long to hear your answer. I will write to you upon my arrival in Derbyshire.”

Elizabeth inclined her head, but did not reply. George Elliott clearly did not require her response, for he strode from the room

with as much confidence as he had entered it, and Elizabeth was left staring incredulously at the hand he had kissed.

She made a face and rubbed her knuckles against her skirts, hoping to remove the feeling of his lips on her skin. But it was his words that sank deeper and unsettled her more.

Did she really have no other options? He was not incorrect in his assumption that she would not be happy as the wife of a garrison officer—but to predict that she would have no other prospects? It was cruel. It was unkind. And it was unfair to assume such a thing.

Mary's face appeared in the doorway. "If he has gone may I continue my practice?" she asked.

"Of course, Mary," Elizabeth replied absently.

Her sister entered the room and took up her seat at the pianoforte once more. As she began to play, Elizabeth turned her face to the window and tried to see some way that she could escape from this choice that had been thrust upon her.

If she dared to refuse his proposal, would another come? *Or was he right?*

If she accepted him it would be out of fear that she would never have another chance at any shred of happiness. She had almost given up hope that the very greatest love she had always dreamed of still lay somewhere over the horizon, waiting for her, but in a moment like this, such a thing seemed impossible.

“Lizzy, I cannot believe that he would march into this house and say such things to you,” Jane exclaimed as they dressed to travel to Netherfield Park for tea.

It had taken Elizabeth two days to tell her sister about what had happened between herself and George Elliott, but when their

mother had brought up Grove House over supper the evening before, she could not stop herself from telling Jane everything.

“He did, indeed,” Elizabeth said vehemently. “And seemed convinced that if I stayed in this house that I would never receive any kind of proposals whatsoever—I shall be six-and-twenty before I would even notice!”

Jane frowned and Elizabeth felt a pang as she remembered that their dear friend Charlotte had passed that very birthday without a single proposal as well... but Elizabeth could not see that as her fate. She was not like Charlotte.

“Well, it is a mercy that he has departed Hertfordshire,” Jane said. “I know you have been looking forward to this invitation to Netherfield Park, and I am glad that you are coming with me. Mr. Bingley’s sisters are... very kind.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. She had observed Mr. Bingley’s sisters at the Meryton assembly, and they had not seemed ‘kind,’ even from a distance.

“We shall see,” Elizabeth said.

As Elizabeth had expected, Mr. Bingley’s sisters were anything but ‘kind,’ and it was only by a small margin that Elizabeth was able to keep her thoughts to herself. Jane was a good person who saw wonderful traits in everyone around her... but to Elizabeth, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst seemed to embody the very worst traits she could imagine.

Miss Bingley was judgemental and petty, and Mrs. Hurst was dismissive and uncharitable. It seemed very strange to her that Mr. Bingley could be such an amiable presence in the midst of these two women.

“Ah, Miss Elizabeth,” Caroline Bingley exclaimed as the tea was served. “I have heard some talk around town that you are to be engaged to someone of Mr. Darcy’s acquaintance.”

Elizabeth choked on her tea and set down the cup lest she spill it accidentally in her shock at such a pronouncement. "I beg your pardon?" she spluttered as Jane handed her a napkin.

"Why, yes, the only son of Mr. Thomas Elliott," she said with a silken smile. "Mr. Darcy is well acquainted with the family. Why, only this morning I asked him about the young man to get a better sense of his character. I believe you will be *very* happy."

Elizabeth dabbed at her lips and swallowed thickly. "I confess you know much more than even myself, Miss Bingley," she said. "There has been no offer of marriage, and I have accepted none."

"A pity," Mrs. Hurst sighed. "There is so little society here in Hertfordshire that one would wish that something were to happen to create some excitement. An engagement would be the very thing."

Elizabeth glanced at her sister who shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Mr. Bingley had made his affections known by his frequent visits to Longbourn, and his announcement that he would have his own ball at Netherfield Park in celebration of the approaching holiday season. But no proposal had come from him, and though she had said nothing about it, Elizabeth knew that Jane had begun to doubt the sincerity of his feelings toward her.

It did not help matters that his sisters were determined at every opportunity to mention how much they missed London and how they looked forward to returning to their house for Christmas.

"Charles is determined to stay, but I daresay we will have him convinced by the second week of November that we should leave before the roads become impassable," Caroline Bingley declared. "I could not imagine being trapped in the countryside for the duration of the winter!"

Jane and Elizabeth had smiled politely at this turn in the conversation but said nothing in response. Elizabeth did not want to upset Jane, and knew that her sister would be thinking of how Mr. Bingley departure would affect her rather than what she could say to convince them to stay and enjoy Christmas in Hertfordshire.

Thankfully, their party was interrupted by the excited arrival of Miss Sophia Darcy. She ran into the room and proceeded to interrupt the tension with her childish questions and her insistence upon crawling up into Elizabeth's lap while still wearing her wet coat and snow-covered shoes. She held a handful of bright purple and yellow pansies that she had plucked while on a walk with her governess.

"Where is that woman?" Miss Bingley declared angrily. "She should never have let the child run off like that!"

Elizabeth ignored the other woman's harsh words and instead slid down from her chair and knelt on the carpet to help Sophia out of her coat and unbuckle her wet shoes so that they could be placed by the hearth to dry.

The pansies were placed in a glass of water upon the table and Elizabeth was happy to be distracted by the young girl's description of the winter garden and how she had put her hands in the snow by the pond and seen the bright orange goldfish swimming below the thin skin of ice that covered the surface.

Sophia stayed happily in Elizabeth's lap, drank carefully from her teacup and nibbled at the corner of a biscuit until her governess came to collect her. The frantic young woman rushed into the parlor and then stopped short when she saw the other occupants of the room.

"I— I do apologize for the intrusion, Miss Bingley," she said haltingly. "Miss Sophia ran away from me and I could not catch her in time to take her to the nursery."

"See that you keep a more careful watch of her," Caroline Bingley snapped. Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at the other woman and then turned to smile at the harried looking governess.

"There is no need to apologize, Sophia has been a delight." She kissed the little girl upon the cheek and set her down on the carpet. "Go to your governess now," Elizabeth said kindly.

"Will I see you soon?" Sophia asked.

"Very soon, indeed," Elizabeth promised, though she did not

know when she would see her again. Or if Miss Bingley would ever invite them back to Netherfield Park. She seemed to be looking for any excuse *not* to have them in her parlor again.

Sophia smiled but walked back to her governess reluctantly and took the young woman's outstretched hand. "You must not run away from me, Miss Sophia," the governess scolded her gently. "Your Papa will be very upset to hear that you have been misbehaving."

Elizabeth could not imagine Mr. Darcy being cross with his daughter, and she knew that the governess' words were an empty threat. Sophia must have known the same because she nodded in response to the woman's words, but continued to giggle as she looked back over her shoulder at Elizabeth.

The governess led the little girl out of the room and Elizabeth sighed heavily and leaned back in her chair. The bright pansies in their crystal glass were beside her teacup, and she wondered if she should take them home to brighten her writing desk at Longbourn. Sophia would not mind.

"That child is the image of her poor mother," Mrs. Hurst sighed. "If only she had not been taken so tragically."

"If only," Caroline Bingley agreed. "Oh, Jane, You would have simply *loved* Rosemary. Such a kind soul, so gentle. Far too spirited a soul for Mr. Darcy, I daresay. But he has always been so gloomy."

"He was not always so," Mrs. Hurst corrected her sister. "It has only been in the last few years that he has seemed to succumb to his loneliness. I had hoped that he would find a young woman who could distract him from such things, but as Sophia grows older I fear that he will not take the chance on another marriage."

"I have heard very differently," Caroline replied. "There was some talk that he would marry Ann de Bourgh. Though I could not imagine a more ill-suited pair. She is always so sickly."

"But very wealthy. Her mother will not allow her to reach her one-and-twentieth birthday without an engagement."

“Surely not,” Caroline agreed. She locked eyes with Elizabeth briefly, and Elizabeth suppressed the urge to stand up from her chair and leave the room. She could not find any reason to like Caroline Bingley, and she did not see the need to pretend, either. But she could not risk that anything she said would put Jane’s position in jeopardy, so it was better for all involved if she said nothing.

“What do you think, Miss Elizabeth?” Mrs. Hurst asked suddenly.

“About what?” Elizabeth asked.

“About a gentleman remarrying after his wife has died. Surely, for the good of the children, it would be a necessary thing. I cannot imagine that Mr. Darcy would allow his daughter to grow up without a motherly figure in her life.”

“But she will have dear Georgiana,” Caroline interrupted. “If Mr. Darcy had seen the need to remarry, why I daresay he would have done it at a much earlier date. Five years is a very long time to punish oneself with grief.”

“Would it not have done his poor wife a disservice to have remarried so quickly?” Elizabeth snapped. “I daresay I would have a poor opinion of a gentleman who did such a thing to ease his own convenience and pass on the burden of his children to another young woman. It would be most unfair to everyone, especially the children.”

“A lovely thought, to be sure,” Caroline Bingley said with a thin smile. “And the assertion of one who has never had to think of such things. Why, when our mother died, our father remarried within the year. It was a marriage of practicality and did not affect us in the slightest.”

Elizabeth glanced at Mrs. Hurst, but the eldest Bingley daughter was not looking at her and was instead focused upon stirring her tea which made Elizabeth suspect that Caroline did not, in fact, speak for both of them.

“Indeed, you are very fortunate,” Elizabeth said quietly.

Their conversation moved on, but Elizabeth could not shake her feeling that Caroline Bingley disliked her for no other reason than that she believed Mr. Darcy had some fondness for her. She had felt the other woman's eyes upon her at the Meryton assembly when she and Mr. Darcy were dancing, and again when they were speaking together before her mother had dragged her away to listen to George Elliott's stories. Was Caroline Bingley jealous of her? Or was there something more to her behavior. She seemed overly possessive of the gentleman—perhaps she had designs of her own on her brother's dear friend. But she did not seem to care for Sophia Darcy in the slightest... it was all very strange, but Elizabeth could not allow herself to believe that there was any motive behind it. It would be uncommonly cruel for her to conspire to keep Mr. Darcy from finding any happiness...

"Lizzy, did you hear what Mrs. Hurst asked?" Jane said quietly.

Elizabeth blinked and tore her eyes away from the pansies. Caroline Bingley, Mrs. Hurst, and Jane were all staring at her and Elizabeth's cheeks reddened with embarrassment at being caught lost in her own thoughts.

"I do apologize," she said. "Please, do continue."

Winter arrived in Hertfordshire with a vengeance, and as

the weather worsened, Mr. Bingley's affection for Jane only seemed to grow. He had come to supper at Longbourn several times, and they had all been invited to Netherfield Park on several occasions as well.

Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Hurst maintained their aloof disinterest in Elizabeth and her sisters, and were polite to Mrs. Bennet, but Elizabeth could see their disdain and their judgement in knowing looks and arched brows and she disliked them even more at every meeting.

Kitty received a proposal of marriage from Mr. Atkinson as November reached its end, and Mrs. Bennet began to excitedly plan the wedding around Kitty's protests and Lydia's whining.

Christmas approached and Longbourn's preparations for the holiday took on a celebratory mood, but Elizabeth could see that there was strain at the edges of Jane's happiness.

One morning Jane received a letter from Netherfield Park and took Elizabeth aside to read it. She opened it as they walked up the stairs to their room and Jane scanned it quickly as they entered.

She seated herself on her bed as Elizabeth closed the door behind them. A smile broke over Jane's face as she looked up at her sister.

"We are invited for a day of skating and merriment at Netherfield Park," she said brightly. Elizabeth felt her chest tighten

at the mention of skating. She had not yet told Jane everything that had happened at Grove House—nor of her brush with death at the frozen pond. She had said that she met Mr. Darcy there, but she had not told her the why of it.

“Lizzy, are you quite all right?” Jane asked as Elizabeth sank down on the bed next to her. “You have gone so pale.”

“I do not believe I shall be in the mood for skating,” she said shakily.

“But whyever not? We used to love skating, but it has not been so cold in past winters as it has this year. The lake will be well frozen and we shall be very merry. I can already taste the spiced cider that will follow!” Jane seemed very excited, but Elizabeth could only summon a weak smile in response.

“Lizzy, will you not tell me what is wrong?” she asked. “You have been hiding something from me, and I will not allow it to go on for any longer!”

Elizabeth sighed and took Jane’s hand. “I only wanted to spare you from any worry,” she said.

“Tell me,” Jane pleaded. “I shall not write my reply to this invitation until you have told me everything.”

With that threat and the disappointment of her family at the possible refusal of the invitation, Elizabeth finally relented and told her sister everything that had happened at Grove House. Jane remained silent until Elizabeth had finished, offering nothing but her quiet support and the occasional squeeze of her hand.

“Lizzy, you could have drowned,” she said quietly. “If it were not for Mr. Darcy...”

“He would have done the same for anyone,” Elizabeth said quickly. She had tried, in vain, for months to reason with herself and place no importance on what he had done. He would have pulled anyone from the water and taken them to safety...

“But he would not have taken such care with just anyone,” Jane observed. “He sent a doctor, came to visit you—”

“Yes... I know.”

“And you have had opportunity to thank him, and speak to him in private?”

“Yes, on many occasions,” Elizabeth said. “He would not accept my thanks with any seriousness.”

“Lizzy, you cannot doubt that he might have some affection for you,” Jane said incredulously. “I refuse to believe such a thing.”

Elizabeth smiled but did not reply.

“Thank you for telling me,” Jane said. “I shall write back to Mrs. Hurst at once and we shall have a merry day in the snow with Mr. Bingley, his sisters, and Mr. Darcy and his delightful daughter.”

“She is a delight,” Elizabeth said. “I have become very fond of her.”

“It would be a tragedy if you did not,” Jane said. “She seems like a lovely girl, and she seems quite fond of you as well!”

Jane pulled her writing desk from beneath her bed and set to work on her reply to Mrs. Hurst’s invitation while Elizabeth sat upon her bed and tried to imagine how their day in the snow would unfold... All she knew was that she would have to be very careful to avoid the ice. She did not want to think that she was afraid, but she did not know how she would feel until she were faced with it.

Bundled into woollen dresses and double layered stockings, the

Bennet sisters climbed into the sleigh that Mr. Bingley had sent to collect them. Elizabeth fought back the memories she had of riding in the Elliott’s sleigh through the Grove House grounds, but chose to smile at the memory of seeing Pemberley for the first time, and of sighting Mr. Darcy in the second floor window.

Kitty and Lydia were beside themselves with excitement, and

Mary, for once, had not raised any argument over leaving the warmth of the parlor.

Mrs. Bennet had declined the invitation, and Elizabeth found herself suspicious of her mother's motives for staying behind. Mr. Bennet was away in London visiting his solicitor and the Gardiners, but he was due to arrive back at Longbourn in a day's time.

Jane's cheeks were pink with excitement and the cold, and Lydia clapped her gloved hands together happily as fur rugs were tucked around their legs and their skating blades were fastened into saddlebags attached to the side of the sleigh.

Elizabeth had been at war with her nerves all morning and they were not settled in the slightest as the sleigh pulled away from Longbourn, nor did they calm as they approached Netherfield Park. Seeing figures gliding over the frozen surface of the lake that was situated near the gardens did not help with her unrest.

Jane gripped her hand tightly as if to say that all would be well, but Elizabeth could only manage a crooked smile in response.

Mr. Bingley walked through the snow to meet them as the sleigh pulled to a stop. His cheeks were red from the cold and his eyes were bright with excitement and happiness to see them—but especially to see Jane.

"You are all very welcome!" he cried and held out his hand to help them down from the sleigh. Kitty, Lydia, and Mary jumped down excitedly and pulled their skates from the saddlebags.

"Is the ice very thick?" Lydia asked loudly.

"Very strong, indeed, Miss Lydia," the gentleman replied with a broad smile. The girls ran toward the lake with their skates tucked under their arms and Elizabeth smiled to see them all getting along without argument for once. She did not know if it was due to the approach of Christmas, Kitty's impending wedding, or the strange weather, but regardless of the reason, Elizabeth was happy to see this change in them.

Mr. Bingley held out his hand to Jane, and Elizabeth's heart swelled to see the affection for each other written plainly on their

faces. There could be no doubting this union, and she hoped that Mr. Bingley would make his offer of marriage sooner than later.

He held out his hand for Elizabeth, but she waved him away and clambered down from the sleigh herself.

“Mr. Darcy and Sophia are already upon the lake,” he said with a smile, and Elizabeth nodded. She could see them moving slowly together as Mr. Darcy skated backwards while holding his daughter’s small hands.

She could not help the warmth that spread through her chest as she watched them together and her dislike for Miss Bingley’s thoughtless words about Mr. Darcy remarrying came flooding back. Mr. Bingley’s sisters sat on chairs that had been brought from the house. They were wrapped in fur blankets and sipped steaming hot cider from china cups instead of partaking in the merriment.

Lydia and Kitty were already shrieking with joy as they stepped out onto the ice and proceeded to flail clumsily about. Mary took her time and was soon gliding gracefully across the ice as her sister’s screamed and laughed at their own misfortunes.

Jane and Mr. Bingley walked ahead of her, their heads close together, and Elizabeth tucked her skates tightly under her arm. She did not want to skate, but she also did not want to show that she was afraid... it would be unavoidable. She knew that much.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy called out to her. “Will you join us?”

Sophia shrieked with happiness to see her and tried to skate to the edge of the lake to greet her. She tripped over her own skates in her excitement, but her father caught her before she could crash to the ice. He set her down on her skates and crouched down to speak softly to her. The little girl nodded and then pressed her lips together in concentration as she skated slowly to the edge without his assistance.

Elizabeth crouched down in the snow at the edge of the lake as the little girl approached and held her arms out. Elizabeth laughed and caught her up in a tight embrace as Sophia reached the edge.

“All by myself, without Papa’s help!” Sophia said proudly.

“You did so very well,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

“Will you skate with us?”

“I am— I have not yet decided,” Elizabeth said haltingly. She could not lie to the child, but she could not very well tell her the truth, either.

“Papa will teach you if you do not know how,” Sophia said seriously.

“Miss Elizabeth knows how to skate very well, indeed,” Mr. Darcy said as he came closer. He reached out for his daughter who took his hand and hopped confidently back onto the ice.

Elizabeth rose from her crouch and brushed the snow off her woollen skirts. “She is doing very well,” Elizabeth said as Sophia tottered away toward where Kitty and Lydia sprawled upon the ice.

“She is very brave for her size,” he chuckled. “I hope she stays that way.”

Elizabeth nodded and looked down at the skates she held.

“Will you be brave today, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked quietly.

“I had not yet decided,” she replied honestly.

He took the skates out of her hands and placed them down at the edge of the lake. “Perhaps it will be easier to begin without them,” he said.

Elizabeth looked up into his eyes and felt panic rising in her throat.

“I will help you,” he said. He held out his hand and after a moment’s hesitation, Elizabeth placed her gloved hand in his. His fingers tightened around hers briefly and she allowed him to pull her gently out onto the ice. Her steps were hesitant, and she fought the panic that threatened to overtake her, but his hand was solid around hers and she did her best to keep her breathing steady. She closed her eyes tightly and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. One careful step at a time.

“You see,” he said. “There is nothing to be afraid of when I am

here.”

Elizabeth opened her eyes cautiously to see Mr. Darcy’s smiling face.

All around her she heard her sister’s squeals of happiness, and saw Jane walking at the edge of the lake with Mr. Bingley. The only sour expressions to be found were upon the faces of Mr. Bingley’s sisters, who seemed not to be enjoying themselves at all—something Elizabeth took no small amount of joy in observing.

“I am not afraid,” Elizabeth replied honestly.

The ice felt firm and solid beneath her feet and her hand was warm in his. She took another bold step, and her boot slipped on a patch of snow that had not been cleared away. Elizabeth’s stomach lurched as she began to fall, and opened her mouth to scream in fear, but Mr. Darcy’s strong arms caught her up and she found herself held tightly against his chest instead of falling to the ice.

“As I promised,” he said softly.

“You are very gallant, Mr. Darcy,” she whispered. “Whatever shall I do if you are not nearby to rescue me?”

She had meant for her words to be teasing, but somehow they sounded strange to her ears, and she suddenly realized how close they were... Close enough that she could feel his breath upon her cheek, and the beat of his heart beneath his coat. *Or was that her own heart pounding hard against her ribs?*

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet!”

The sudden shout startled Elizabeth enough to cause her to shift her weight unexpectedly, causing her foot to slip out from under her once more. But this time she could not fall, and she smiled up at Mr. Darcy in gratitude. But the gentleman was not looking at her, he was looking over her shoulder with a stony gaze. He released her gently, but kept a hand upon her elbow in case she should lose her footing once more.

“I believe you have a visitor,” he said softly.

Elizabeth felt a wave of cold foreboding sweep through her as the new arrival called her name once more. She turned to see the

figure of the very gentleman whose return to Hertfordshire she had been dreading.

“Mr. Elliott,” she said. “What an unexpected surprise.”

“Indeed, it does seem so,” he replied.

“You are more than welcome to join us,” Mr. Darcy said, but Elizabeth could hear that his offer was disingenuous and meant only as a politeness.

George Elliott frowned. “I think not. I have come to speak to Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth smiled apologetically at Mr. Darcy and stepped carefully over the ice to the edge of the lake. If she had expected George Elliott to assist her in stepping onto the shore, she was mistaken and she gritted her teeth as she felt herself begin to slip and then caught her balance and stepped onto the snow-covered shore.

Mr. Darcy turned away and skated toward his daughter, but Elizabeth could see that he did it with reluctance. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst watched her with interest from her chairs.

“What might I do for you, Mr. Elliott?” Elizabeth asked.

“It has been some months since I made my offer,” he said. “I have come for your response.”

“And you came *here* to ask it of me?”

“Your mother was kind enough to tell me where I could find you,” he replied firmly. “She assured me that you had given my offer much consideration.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together in frustration and felt anger flare in her chest.

Mama...

“That I have,” she said. “You were invited to partake in our merriment, and you declined... and I must say that the fact that you would come out here to demand a response of me instead of awaiting my return to Longbourn does not bode well for our intended union.”

“Your answer,” George Elliott growled.

Elizabeth raised her chin and glared back at him. "I cannot accept your offer," she said. "You seem convinced that I will be unhappy and unmarried here... but I would choose to be alone and unhappy than married to a gentleman who would have me believe that I am worth nothing more."

George Elliott's pale eyes narrowed. "I can see that you are steadfast in your decision," he said. "And I suspect that your heart has been gifted elsewhere."

Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest. "Then there is nothing here for you," she said firmly.

"Indeed not," he snapped. "I wish you joy of your decision."

Elizabeth did not reply and she watched the gentleman mount a black horse that stood nearby pawing at the ground for grass that was hidden beneath the snow. He glared at her from the back of the beast before he spurred it into a gallop and disappeared over a hill on the road that led back to Meryton.

She frowned and turned back to the lake. Her sisters seemed not to have noticed the exchange, but Mr. Darcy was speaking to Mr. Bingley at the edge of the lake while Jane helped Sophia to remove her skates.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst whispered together in their chairs and Elizabeth could not help but feel many pairs of eyes upon her as she walked back toward the lake.

Preparations for Christmas had begun at Longbourn, and

Elizabeth was in the midst of decorating the dining room with Kitty and Lydia when Jane burst into the room. Tears streaked her sister's face, and Elizabeth immediately feared the worst—but what the worst could be, she did not know.

“Jane, whatever is the matter?”

Jane held up a letter and Elizabeth took it from her sister's shaking fingers. “It is from Caroline Bingley,” she said. “From her letter, she has made it very clear that the whole party have left Netherfield, and are on their way to London—and without any intention of coming back again.”

Elizabeth read aloud, “I do not pretend to regret anything I shall leave in Hertfordshire, except your society, my dearest friend; but we will hope, at some future period, to enjoy many returns of that delightful...” Elizabeth rolled her eyes at the highflown expressions. “Jane, I am very surprised by this! I had thought they were well determined to stay long past Christmas. Mr. Bingley was intent on hosting a Christmas ball at Netherfield Park! We had already begun to assist Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst with the plans...”

“I am all confusion,” Jane said softly.

Elizabeth suddenly remembered that their youngest sisters were in the room, and she did not want them to hear the remainder of the letter. “Kitty, Lydia, please continue with the boughs. I shall

fetch some more cones and golden berries to dress them.”

The girls nodded, engrossed in the arrangement of the pine boughs and Elizabeth took Jane by the elbow and led her out of the dining room and into the corridor.

“Caroline decidedly says that none of the party will return into Hertfordshire this winter.” She took the letter from Elizabeth’s hand and read aloud from it again. “When my brother left us yesterday, he imagined that the business which took him to London might be concluded in three or four days; but as we are certain it cannot be so, and at the same time convinced that when Charles gets to town he will be in no hurry to leave it again.”

Jane took a deep breath and then continued, “With great reluctance, we have determined on following him to London, that he may not be obliged to spend his vacant hours in a comfortless hotel. Many of my acquaintances are already there for Christmas; I wish that I could hear that you, my dearest friend, had any intention of making one of the crowd—but of that I despair. I sincerely hope your Christmas in Hertfordshire may abound in the gaieties which that season generally brings, and that your beaux will be so numerous as to prevent your feeling the loss of the three of whom we shall deprive you.”

Jane appeared thoroughly defeated by this, and Elizabeth felt only anger at Miss Bingley’s words. “It is only evident from this letter that Caroline Bingley does not intend for him to return. Many things may change, Jane... When three or four days have passed, he may yet change his mind.”

“There is more,” Jane said.

“Mr. Darcy is impatient to see his sister; and, to confess the truth, *we* are scarcely less eager to meet her again. I really do not think Georgiana Darcy has her equal for beauty, elegance, and accomplishments; and the affection she inspires in Louisa and myself is heightened into something still more interesting, from the hope we dare entertain of her being hereafter our sister. I do not know whether I ever before mentioned to you my feelings on this

subject; but I will not leave the country without confiding them, and I trust you will not esteem them unreasonable. My brother admires her greatly already; he will have frequent opportunity now of seeing her on the most intimate footing; her relations all wish the connection as much as his own; and a sister's partiality is not misleading me, I think, when I call Charles most capable of engaging any woman's heart. With all these circumstances to favour an attachment, and nothing to prevent it, am I wrong, my dearest Jane, in indulging the hope of an event which will secure the happiness of so many?"

Elizabeth frowned. Caroline Bingley had wasted no time in expressing her desires for her brother's intended future.

"Is it not clear enough?" Jane said mournfully. "Does it not expressly declare that Caroline neither expects nor wishes me to be her sister... and that she is perfectly convinced of her brother's indifference toward me, which are none!"

Elizabeth sighed heavily and took the letter back from her sister. She scanned Miss Bingley's words and felt another surge of anger. She shook her head. "This is most unfair, Jane. I can see only one possibility. Caroline Bingley sees that her brother is in love with you, and wants him to marry Miss Darcy instead. She followed him to London in the hope of keeping him there so that she might attempt to persuade him that he does not care for you."

Jane shook her head, her dismay very clear on her face.

"Please, Jane, you must believe me," Elizabeth said. "No one who has ever seen you together can doubt his affection for you. Miss Bingley, I am sure, cannot. The problem is that we are not rich enough or grand enough for them. My dearest, Jane, you cannot seriously imagine that because Miss Bingley tells you that her brother greatly admires Miss Darcy, that he is in the smallest degree less sensible of *your* merit than when we departed Netherfield Park just the other day... Or that it will be in her power to persuade him that, instead of being in love with you, he is very much in love with her friend? I should hope this would not

be so, else I would have to lament my good opinion of him.”

Jane pressed her palms against her wet cheeks and wiped away her tears. “Oh, Lizzy, even if he does return, can I be happy in accepting a man whose sisters and friends are all wishing for him to marry elsewhere?”

Elizabeth laughed and then tried her best to smile reassuringly. “My dear, Jane, you must decide if you will be too much of a hardship to consider being Mrs. Bingley while his sisters are actively campaigning against you, then you must refuse him.”

Jane smiled faintly. “Only you can speak in such a way and not sound harsh or cold-hearted. But if he returns no more this winter, my choice will never be required. A thousand things may arise in six months!”

The idea that Mr. Bingley would never return to Hertfordshire seemed impossible. She hoped that the opinions of his sisters would not influence a young man such as he. Elizabeth did not bestow her good opinions lightly, and she would be heartily disappointed if it were shown that she had been mistaken when it came to Mr. Bingley.

Elizabeth only hoped that she would be able to convince Jane of the same, but it seemed that Miss Bingley’s letter had performed its intended purpose.

They agreed that their mother should only hear of the departure of the Bingleys, without being informed of any other details of Caroline Bingley’s letter. It would be of no use for Mrs. Bennet to be in possession of such information. They knew that even this minimal amount of news would send their mother into a maelstrom of overblown emotions, but that could not be helped.

Elizabeth, for her part, was also not convinced that Caroline Bingley’s letter was entirely accurate. They had been to town and heard nothing of a large party leaving the estate... What if they had not left at all and Miss Bingley hoped that Jane would be forlorn enough to take the letter seriously. Perhaps if she did not visit, and did not call upon Netherfield Park, Mr. Bingley would

believe that Jane's affections had waned.

It would not do.

With the rest of the family distracted with preparations for Christmas, Elizabeth was able to find a reason to slip away from the house under the pretence of walking into town. The snow had stopped falling and the roads were clear enough that she could make her way to Netherfield Park without much trouble, and without calling for a carriage.

Bundled against the weather, Elizabeth set off with determination in her heart. She would discover the truth behind Mr. Bingley's departure from Hertfordshire. She was certain that even if there were no one in residence that the caretaker would be able to answer any questions she might have.

The miles she had to walk seemed short as she admired the beauty of the countryside as it was buried beneath the fresh snow that had fallen the day before. She stood on the hill that overlooked Netherfield Park and clenched her small hands into fists. She would find the truth—for Jane's sake.

The house appeared abandoned, but Elizabeth was not convinced. She marched up the drive and into the courtyard, noting that there were carriage wheel marks and hoof prints in the packed snow.

She smiled briefly and walked toward the front doors. She lifted the heavy wrought iron knocker to announce her presence, but the door opened under her hand and Mr. Springfield, Netherfield Park's butler, appeared in the doorway.

"Good afternoon, Miss Bennet," he said with some surprise. "I did not expect to see you—"

"I do apologize," Elizabeth said. "I did come here without an

invitation. Is Mr. Bingley in residence?"

The older gentleman shook his head. "Unfortunately not, Miss Bennet. He has departed for London."

"And Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst?"

"They have also departed, bound for the same destination."

Elizabeth's shoulders dropped. Jane would be devastated by this news. She sighed heavily and opened her mouth to thank the man for his time, but he surprised her by continuing to speak.

"However, Mr. Darcy is still in residence," he said.

Elizabeth brightened instantly. "Indeed, that is wonderful news. Might I be allowed to see him?"

The butler opened the door wide enough to allow her to enter. "Of course, he is in the library with Miss Sophia."

The older man led Elizabeth down the corridor toward Netherfield's library as Elizabeth began to unwind her shawls and scarves and removed her gloves.

"Mr. Darcy, Miss Elizabeth Bennet to see you," the butler said as he paused at the door of the library. He smiled at Elizabeth as she walked past him and he left her to enter the room alone.

Mr. Darcy was seated by the fire with a book in his hand. He looked up as she came in, but the expression of surprise on his face was not what Elizabeth had expected.

"Miss Elizabeth," he said. "I did not... that is—"

"My sister received a letter from Miss Bingley. She seemed convinced that your entire party had departed Netherfield for London, and meant not to return!"

Mr. Darcy shook his head. "Miss Bingley was overly callous in her desire to send that letter. I told her that she should not send it, but she insisted."

Elizabeth stared at him incredulously. "You knew about this letter?" she asked. "Are its contents true? Does Mr. Bingley truly plan to marry your sister?"

Mr. Darcy frowned and set his book down upon the table beside him. "I cannot speak for Mr. Bingley's intentions, but I am happy

to say that my sister is intentioned elsewhere... perhaps that might give your sister some comfort.”

“What comfort would it offer if he is never to return to Hertfordshire?” Elizabeth blurted out. She knew that she should not speak her mind, but she could not keep from doing so. She was angry on Jane’s behalf, and this was the only opportunity she might have to discover the truth.

“I do not understand why he would choose to leave Hertfordshire...” Elizabeth continued. “Surely, if his business in London was only to take a few days, he would plan to return here —”

Mr. Darcy sighed heavily and stood up from his chair. “Mr. Bingley’s business in London is not my concern, he told me only that it would keep him from Netherfield for a few days time—but I did not feel that his return would be necessary. There is nothing for him here.”

Elizabeth gasped at his words. “How can you say such a thing?” she asked. “His affection for my sister is very clear—surely, you cannot support Caroline Bingley’s assertion that there is nothing between them.”

“Even if there were—”

“What are you saying?” Elizabeth cried. She could take this no longer. “Please, you must tell me the truth! My sister is devastated by this departure, and though she will never express it, she would want to know why.”

Mr. Darcy walked past her to the window and he looked out over the snow-covered gardens. “Mr. Bingley left because I asked him to.”

“What do you mean?” Elizabeth was confused and could not sort through her feelings quickly enough to know how to react.

“I had not thought I would ever have to say such a thing, and I have been laboring over this for many sleepless nights... I could not bear the thought of my dear friend tying himself to a family—”

“To a family such as mine?” Elizabeth blazed.

“Not for the reasons that Miss Bingley has,” he said.

“Then what could it be?” Elizabeth demanded. “I came here to find answers for Jane... and yet I am only being given more questions.”

Mr. Darcy shook his head and turned from the window. “I did not think I would ever have to speak these words aloud. Miss Bennet—Elizabeth—I could not bear the thought of Mr. Bingley being tied to the family of a woman I loved but could not possess... It would break my heart, and Sophia’s, to see you married to someone else. And if that gentleman were George Elliott, it would make that pain all the more unbearable to know that you would be so close. And yet so unreachable...”

Elizabeth’s mouth fell open in surprise. “George Elliott?” she said. “You have damaged the happiness of your greatest friend and my dearest sister for the sake of George Elliott? Do you hate him so much that you would commit such a selfish act?”

“Selfish? Yes, I suppose it was. But I did not do it for dislike of George Elliott...”

“No, you did it to protect your own heart,” Elizabeth said sadly. “Much as you have experienced rumors of your own engagement to Anne deBourgh, rumors of my own engagement have also been misused.” Tears pricked at her eyelids and Elizabeth blinked them away before they could fall and betray her. “I refused George Elliott’s proposal in favor of—” she paused for a moment and swiped furiously at a tear that had slipped down her cheek. “In favor of my own best interests... and my own happiness. I did not believe for a moment that such a thing would be used to punish my sister. She was an innocent victim in this... and she deserves your apology. As does Mr. Bingley.”

Mr. Darcy looked out the window once more, and suddenly Elizabeth could not bear to stand in the room any longer.

“I wish you joy of your Christmas,” she said softly. “I will have someone bring over the gift I made for Sophia. You may decide whether or not to give it to her along with my best wishes and my

love.”

The gentleman’s shoulders stiffened, but he did not reply and Elizabeth took that as her dismissal. She left the library and walked down the corridor toward the front doors as quickly as she could while re-wrapping herself in her shawls and scarves.

Mr. Springfield was nowhere to be seen and Elizabeth was grateful that the man would not be present to see the tears that wet her cheeks as she pulled open the door and stepped out into the dull gray day.

The cold wind tugged at her woollen dress and teased at her dark curls. She rubbed at her cheeks furiously with her gloved hands and stomped down the steps and onto the snow-covered courtyard.

There was no need to look back at the house; she knew that Mr. Darcy was watching her from the library window, and she could not bear the sight of him for her heart was already broken and did not need to be damaged afresh.

A headache loomed behind Elizabeth eyes. It was Christmas

Eve, and Mary was steadfastly picking her way through yet another drawn out psalm that she had set to a clashing tune which only aggravated her more. As usual, Lydia was not helping matters as she did her best to pluck sheets of Mary's painstakingly transcribed music away from the pianoforte.

"Can you not play something more cheerful?" she complained as she snatched once again at the papers and interrupted her sister's playing.

"Lydia come and sit with me," cried Kitty. "I am having ever so much trouble with this wreath." Kitty had been unsuccessfully constructing a holly wreath for the last few hours. It was intended for the front door to welcome Christmas Day guests to Longbourn, including her husband-to-be and his family, and it was a messy affair.

Shining holly leaves were strewn over the floor and Kitty moaned as another berry fell off the branch she was trying to tie to the wreath. It rolled across the carpet and came to a stop against Elizabeth's foot.

Lydia wrinkled her nose as Mary began to play again. "The last time you asked me to help you make a holly wreath; my arms were so covered in scratches that the officers at Colonel Forster's Christmas Ball laughed at me over our baked apples." Lydia pouted at the memory. "It was a most embarrassing scene and I will not

repeat it!"

Kitty sighed dejectedly, but bent over the wreath again, determined to make it serviceable. The table in front of her was laden with boughs of holly, hemlock and hellebore, and Kitty had also been gifted some mistletoe from Mrs. Atkinson's garden, which Elizabeth had planned to hang over the doorway.

Since the departure of Mr. Bingley and his sisters from Netherfield Park, Mrs. Bennet had added to the misery of the situation quite accidentally with wild plans to have her eldest daughters suitably engaged by the time the New Year arrived. She had decided that she could not forgive Mr. Bingley for departing town so close to the holiday, and that putting her daughters in front of new gentlemen would chase away the melancholy that seemed to have settled over the house.

Elizabeth had not told Jane about her visit to Netherfield Park, nor her conversation with Mr. Darcy—she felt responsible enough for Jane's misery as it was, and she could not bear the thought of her sister being cross with her. She knew in her heart that Jane would not be angry with her, but it was a risk that Elizabeth was unwilling to take. There might yet be time to set everything right, though she did not yet know how.

"You know, Lizzy," Mrs. Bennet had remarked one morning over breakfast, "I hear from my good friend Mrs. Fletcher that *her* friend Mrs. Caulfield has a son of an age where a young man should be in want of a good wife and companion. He has two thousand a year, which is nothing to turn one's nose up at, mind you. He is not the wealthiest gentleman to come to Hertfordshire, but no matter," Mrs. Bennet said with a warmly conspiratorial smile. "I do not know his profession, but I hear from Mrs. Fletcher that he is well placed for advancement and has a membership to a very fine club in London."

"Oh, indeed," Elizabeth had replied, wanting nothing more than for the conversation to be over.

"You will also be happy to know that Mrs. Caulfield and her

son are coming to Hertfordshire to visit my dear friend, and they have invited us all to a grand Christmas dinner, is that not wonderful, girls?"

Elizabeth had stared at her mother incredulously, but it should not have surprised her that Mrs. Bennet would be so eager to have all of her daughters suitably engaged before gossip began to spread through town that the Bennet girls were responsible for chasing not one, but two, eligible bachelors from the area.

Elizabeth was certain that there was entirely enough gossip already threading its way through Meryton thanks to Mr. Elliott's boisterous arrival and speedy departure. But that could not be helped. Especially if he had decided to visit at Lucas Lodge before leaving Meryton.

"Mama, we always spend Christmas Eve at home decorating the house and hanging boughs. Poor Mrs. Hill has been gathering ingredients for her mulled wine all week, and Kitty has been working so hard on her decorations." Elizabeth would have said anything to dissuade her mother from her plans, but Mrs. Bennet was as stubborn as ever, and would not be moved. Even Mr. Bennet had been forced to agree to attend this dinner, though Elizabeth knew he would hold a grudge over it for quite some time.

"Nonsense, Lizzy," her mother had cried, waving her handkerchief to dismiss her daughter's complaints. "We do the same thing *every* year, and it has become quite tiresome and predictable. This year we have a *great* deal to celebrate, not the least of which is Kitty's engagement and the impending wedding! The moment I have planned some grand surprise you will do your very best to cast it aside. Between you and Mr. Bennet I do not know how I have any nerves left at all!"

"Mama, I am not trying to argue," she began, but Kitty and Lydia's excited cries and pleading and arguments about what to wear and what to bring had drowned out anything she might have said.

Mrs. Bennet had spent the last few days basking in her hard won victory, and Elizabeth sank deeper and deeper into an unnameable despair that seemed to follow her everywhere.

Since her return from Netherfield Park on that cold afternoon, Elizabeth had spent entirely too much time thinking. And the more time she spent thinking about the myriad ways in which Mr. Darcy, and indeed his daughter as well, had changed her life, the more she was convinced that she could not be happy unless she was with him.

Jane had been oddly quiet in the few weeks that had passed since Mr. Bingley's departure from Hertfordshire and though Elizabeth longed to give her some reassurance that nothing that had happened was any fault of her own, she could not find the words to say so. Jane waited every day for replies to the letters she wrote to Caroline Bingley, but none ever came.

Mrs. Bennet swept into the parlor dressed for town and looked in horror at her daughters' activities. "Kitty, do stop fussing with that holly! Your fingers are bleeding, and you have berry juice on your face. However did you manage that? You are not wearing that to Mrs. Fletcher's dinner, go and change at once!"

Mrs. Bennet paused briefly and looked over Jane and Elizabeth, seeking something to criticize but mercifully found nothing. She focused on an easier target instead.

"Mary, do please try to do something with your hair. A ribbon, just a scrap of ribbon once in a while, is that too much to ask? Go and fetch my ribbon box and remind your father that we are leaving as soon as that clock strikes the hour!"

Mary sighed and left her seat at the pianoforte reluctantly. She slapped at Lydia's hand before the youngest Bennet girl could pluck the sash on Mary's dress undone as she passed. Lydia giggled to herself and fluffed the skirts of her dress.

"I do hope that Mr. Caulfield is handsome," she said brightly. "Mama, is he handsome? Please say that he is. I do so love to hold conversations with handsome young men. Perhaps he will dance

with me after supper—“

“Lydia,” Mrs. Bennet said sharply. “You know very well that if there is any dancing to be done after supper that I intend Mr. Caulfield to be asking Lizzy. Not you. But you will be relieved to know that Mrs. Fletcher speaks very highly of Mr. Caulfield’s appearance. She tells me that he is a well-dressed young man, which, given his income, one might expect. I have always said that a man may be fairly judged by the company he keeps, and by the sharpness of his tailoring. Mark me well, girls, for I am never wrong about these matters.” Mrs. Bennet declared as she left the room in a cloud of perfume and powder.

Jane looked at the clock, it was nearly time to leave. The carriage would be waiting outside the house and Lydia would run ahead of them all to secure a seat nearest to the window so that she could look out and comment on everything they passed. On Christmas Eve, there would be surely still be people in the streets of town, no doubt dressed in their finest.

As though on cue, Lydia leapt up from her seat and rushed towards the front door. Jane sighed and rose from her seat to follow, but Elizabeth stayed seated.

“Come now, Lizzy, I will not have you delay our leaving. Your father will do his very best I have no doubt,” Mrs. Bennet said loftily from the corridor. Jane paused in the doorway to looking back at Elizabeth who had still made no move to follow her mother.

“I am not going, Mama,” Elizabeth declared. “I am... I am not feeling well. My head is aching, and I fear that I will not be good company this evening.” It was a weak excuse, and she could see her mother’s mind working furiously. The clock on the mantle began to chime and Mr. Bennet could be heard in the hallway.

“Mrs. Bennet! We must be away unless you have changed your mind at the last possible moment...”

“Mr. Bennet do not ruin this evening for me,” Mrs. Bennet called out, her cheeks reddening slightly. She looked back at her

stubborn daughter, “although Lizzy seems determined to do just that.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and swallowed her sharp response. “Mama,” she said calmly, “there is far too much to prepare to have the house ready for our Christmas Day guests, especially with Mr. Atkinson’s family coming all the way from Brighton to see us...”

Mrs. Bennet nodded slowly and raised an eyebrow. “Of course, I have not forgotten.”

“We cannot have the house undecorated on such a happy day, I would not have Kitty’s joyous moment diminished in any way. Did you not say how *dearly* you wished to make Lady Lucas have an attack of jealousy when she saw how festive our house would be? If I come to supper, there will be nothing to greet our guests but the remnants of Kitty’s attempts at a wreath.”

Mrs. Bennet was very obviously torn. She wanted her house to be beautiful and enviable for the celebration of Kitty’s engagement, and she also wanted to see her elder daughters suitably engaged... but she also realized that she could not have all things at the same time.

Mr. Bennet harrumphed irritably from the hallway and Mary was beginning to ask if she could stay home as well. Mrs. Bennet snapped her fan closed and pointed it at her daughter. “If I allow you stay home, you must promise me that you will dance *twice* with Mr. Caulfield at Colonel Forster’s Christmas ball.”

Elizabeth paused and considered her mother’s ultimatum carefully. Agreement would mean that she could avoid whatever awkwardness would arise from being seated at dinner next to a young man she did not intend to speak to at length. At a ball, there would be greater opportunity for distraction, and the opportunity to slip away if Mr. Caulfield proved to be poor company.

Mrs. Bennet’s desperation to see her eldest daughters wed would no doubt reveal some poor options for a husband, and while Elizabeth hoped that Mr. Caulfield was not one of those creatures,

she did not have a great amount of faith in Mrs. Fletcher's assessments of character.

"Yes, Mama," she said with a sigh. "If that is what I must agree to, then I promise I will dance with Mr. Caulfield."

"Two dances," Mrs. Bennet snapped.

"Two dances."

"And not two in quick succession. I expect you to dance, and then engage in conversation..."

"Mama, will you be planning our entire interaction?" Elizabeth interjected.

Mrs. Bennet fanned herself quickly in irritation. "If you persist in your stubbornness, I may entertain that proposal."

"Mrs. Bennet!" Mr. Bennet roared from the hallway.

"Yes, yes!" Mrs. Bennet cried.

Elizabeth folded her hands in her lap and smiled tensely up at her mother. "Do please offer my apologies to Mrs. Fletcher and Mrs. Caulfield, I am sure I will see them at the ball tomorrow evening."

"Indeed," Mrs. Bennet sniffed. She fixed Elizabeth with one last glare and then flounced down the hallway to where her husband and daughters waited.

Elizabeth held her breath and waited until the front door slammed shut and she could hear the sound of the driver snapping the reins before she relaxed against the back of the chair she sat in.

She let the quiet of the house settle over her.

The *snap* of the fire in the hearth was her only company and Elizabeth allowed herself to smile. Without Kitty's help, the decorating would go much slower than she had planned, but Elizabeth was not worried. Mrs. Hill and Anna, the kitchen maid, would surely lend a hand if she asked, and her family would likely be out for most of the evening. Longer if Mr. Bennet somehow decided that he was enjoying himself.

The table was strewn with the remnants of Kitty's efforts, and

Elizabeth rose from her chair to examine the mess for anything salvageable.

A ribbon box and several sprigs of mistletoe and pine cones were scattered about, and Elizabeth seated herself at the table and began to work. She had planned to swag the hallways with evergreen and holly, and she was going to construct a kissing bough for the entrance to the parlour. It would have very little use in this house except as something for her younger sisters to giggle about as they passed under it, or make a wish about whom they might like to kiss, but that would be the end of it.

The Yule Log that Kitty had prepared was waiting by the fireplace, but Elizabeth wanted to inspect it one last time to make sure that it was perfect.

Mr. Bingley's absence and Jane's subsequent melancholy had made Elizabeth even more determined to ensure that this holiday season was every bit as beautiful as it could be, despite her mother's selfish plans to make it as complicated as possible under the pretence of adding some excitement to their lives.

Since the departure of the Bingley's and Hurst's from Netherfield Park, there had been quite enough excitement in their lives, at least for Elizabeth's taste.

Elizabeth's fingers flew over the materials she had chosen for the kissing bough. Evergreen branches, golden apples, mistletoe and bright red satin and velvet ribbon scraps that she wound into the shape of dark roses. When she and Jane had been children, decorating the bough with paper flowers had been their favorite task, but as they had grown older, and Kitty, Mary, and Lydia had become distracted by other pursuits, Elizabeth had exchanged the nostalgic elements for something a little more elegant.

She received compliments for her decorating choices every year, and while she was not given to pride very often, Elizabeth was confident that this year would be no different.

Hours passed, and Elizabeth enlisted the reluctant help of both Mrs. Hill and Anna, both of whom were equally relieved and disgruntled to be pulled away from their preparations for the Christmas Day feast that would adorn their table.

If Mrs. Bennet had not changed their Christmas Eve plans, the glazed ham that Mrs. Hill was agonizing over would have been set upon the table even now.

Despite their grumbling, by the time all the decorations had been hung and the mantles set with fresh hemlock and rosemary from the Longbourn gardens and Elizabeth had lit the candles, both Mrs. Hill and Anna were pink-cheeked and smiling.

"Thank you for your help," Elizabeth said as she lit the last candle. Anna smiled and laid another log on the fire.

"It has started to snow again, Miss Lizzy, I do hope the family will be back soon," Mrs. Hill said nervously as she looked out the window into the dark.

"I am sure they will not tarry long, you know how Papa hates inclement weather of any kind. They will be home soon enough, and when they do come, the house will smell like Christmas and the parlour will be warm," Elizabeth said with what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Besides, if the weather is too foul to travel, Mrs. Fletcher will certainly offer for them to stay the night, but I do not see Papa accepting such an offer, especially on Christmas Eve."

Mrs. Hill and Anna gathered ribbons and branches with them to add some decoration to their own rooms and Elizabeth helped them with a smile upon her face. She waited until Mrs. Hill had left the room before she stopped Anna in the doorway.

"Was the package I gave you delivered to Netherfield Park?" she asked quietly.

Anna nodded and smiled. "Indeed, it was, Miss. I took it myself. What a fine estate Netherfield Park is."

"It surely is," Elizabeth agreed. "And whom did you give the package to?"

"To Mr. Springfield," Anna replied, but then she paused. "But as I went to leave, another gentleman came out to see me. He demanded to know who had sent the package and what was in it."

Elizabeth's throat tightened. *Mr. Darcy, it could only have been him.*

"And, what did you say?"

"As you told me to, Miss Lizzy, I said that it was for Miss Sophia Darcy, and that it was from someone who loved her. I did not give your name at all."

Elizabeth nodded. "Thank you for your pains, Anna. I do hope he was not angry with you."

Anna shook her head. "No, no, Miss. Not at all. He seemed a very sad sort of gentleman. I would never have expected anyone living in such a fine house to be sad."

"Indeed," Elizabeth said quietly. "I did not think so, either."

She bid Anna goodnight and busied herself with cleaning up the scraps and branches from the tables and swept the fallen leaves and needles into the fire where they crackled and crisped merrily in the flames.

Tomorrow's Christmas luncheon would be a fine thing indeed, and Elizabeth knew that both women would be visiting family in town in the morning. Mr. Bennet had seen to their Christmas gifts already, and Kitty and Mary had made each of the servants something small and personal as a token of their affection. Embroidered handkerchiefs were Kitty's newest obsession, and though her stitches were sometimes uneven, her determination was unmatched and despite their tiny flaws, each piece had come out beautifully and were made even more special by the fact that it would be Kitty's last Christmas at Longbourn as an unmarried woman.

Alone once more, Elizabeth pulled a cushion from her mother's chaise and set it in front of the fire. When she had been a girl,

years ago, it seemed now, she and Jane would sit in front of the fire on Christmas Eve and try to see their future husbands in the flames. Elizabeth had never seen anything in the fire that danced in the grate, but Kitty had claimed to see a tall young man with dark hair—and Mr. Atkinson was both of those things.

Elizabeth stared into the fire; it seemed a ridiculous thing to do. A woman of almost two and twenty, looking for a sign from the beyond about the identity of her husband to be. Divining the future, indeed.

But, then again, perhaps she could see something. She leaned closer, the heat from the fire warmed her cheeks and made her eyes water. She wiped at her face, trying to look more closely. *There!* Curling dark hair, a tall, graceful frame...

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat. It could not be. Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. She had clearly been thinking about the gentleman far too much. Much more than he might have deserved. But she could see him in the flames as clearly as though he were standing before her.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet?"

Elizabeth gasped and jerked away from the heat of the fire.

Whatever was the matter with her?

First she could see him in the flames, and now she could hear his voice... his voice calling her name as though he were—

"Miss Elizabeth?"

There it was again, louder now and Elizabeth realized that she was no longer alone. She scrambled to her feet, embarrassed at being caught unawares at such a childish pursuit.

"Mr. Darcy!" She gasped, shocked to see him standing in the parlor doorway. "How— That is, I mean..."

"I do apologize, your housekeeper answered the door... she said that you would here— I do not mean to intrude," he said.

Elizabeth was not sure how she should react to his presence here, he appeared genuinely chagrined, and she felt herself soften toward him somewhat. It was Christmas, after all.

“There is no need to apologize,” she sighed. “And it is I who should be embarrassed for jumping up and shouting at you instead of wishing you a Happy Christmas and welcoming you properly,” she said, her cheeks hot from more than the fire.

Mr. Darcy smiled. “Happy Christmas to you, Miss Elizabeth,” he replied, and then paused as he looked about the room. “If I may enquire, where is your family? I should think that with as many sisters as you are in possession of that the house would be full of noise and merriment.”

Elizabeth smiled at his question. “On any other occasion you would be correct, my sisters, especially the youngest of them, are not given to being quiet, especially at this time of year. Tonight they are dining at Fletcher House, my mother was determined that we should do something ‘different’ for Christmas Eve.”

“Different?”

“Yes, a gentleman visiting from London, a Mr. Caulfield, my mother believes that he would be a welcome addition to our holiday table...” Elizabeth paused, not quite knowing why she had mentioned Mr. Caulfield. She looked away, unable to bear the intensity of Mr. Darcy’s gaze.

“I see,” he said, and Elizabeth heard a stiffness in his words that reminded her of her anger toward him. “But you chose to stay at home?”

“I could not bear to leave the house un-decorated. With Kitty’s engagement to Mr. Atkinson, and the threat of a very full house on Christmas morning, I knew that I had to stay and finish it. As my gift to her...” Elizabeth stammered just a little, her words coming out in a rush.

Mr. Darcy looked around the room with an expression of appreciation on his usually stoic face. “You did all of this?”

“I had some assistance, but yes,” she replied, all of her shyness and awkward feelings fading away as she was able to talk about the decorations she had arranged or made herself.

Christmas was a special holiday in her mind, and she loved

nothing better than the smell of evergreen boughs and the spiced wine that she enjoyed while sitting by the fire on long dark nights. Mr. Darcy reached up to touch the evergreens that adorned the parlour doorway, and Elizabeth realized how close she was to him. She could smell the snow that had fallen on his shoulders and see the flicker of the candlelight in Mr. Darcy's dark eyes.

She looked away quickly, focusing instead on his hands as they touched the boughs gently. "Are these roses?" he asked quietly, as though realizing himself just how close she was to him.

"Yes... made of velvet ribbon scraps. It seemed too childish to cover it in paper flowers as we did when we were children," she said, once again not knowing why she was telling him this.

Surely, he could not find this conversation interesting. She must find out what he wanted, why he was here. It was almost improper that she was here alone and unchaperoned on Christmas Eve. She licked her lips and tried to think of something to say to pull the conversation away from the mistletoe that was hanging above Mr. Darcy's head.

"I have seen these roses before," he said suddenly.

Elizabeth could not hide her surprise. "You have?"

"Indeed, on a gift that was sent to Netherfield Park for Sophia. A gift made by someone who loves her."

Elizabeth's cheeks warmed suddenly. "I did not want to send a note—if you decided not to hurt Sophia by giving her the gift, I understand."

She had made the little girl a doll from fabric scraps. A doll with an embroidered face, blue eyes, and dark hair like Sophia's with tiny velvet roses on her skirts and in her hair.

"I did give it to her," he said softly.

"Oh."

"You were right, Elizabeth," he said and her breath caught in her throat to hear her name on his lips. "I was selfish, and in doing so I have hurt many people that I care about. And I have come here to beg for your forgiveness."

Forgiveness?

Elizabeth had labored long over whether or not she would be able to forgive Mr. Darcy for his selfish act. She could not forgive Caroline Bingley... that woman was irredeemable.

"I understand if you cannot bestow such a thing upon me," he said. "But I came here to ask it of you regardless."

Elizabeth blinked at him, unable to form the proper words. She should thank him for his honesty, commend him for his humility... but she could not.

"What good is this forgiveness?" she choked out. "My sister's heart is still broken, you have still lied to Mr. Bingley and turned his sisters against Jane... And punished all of them on the pretence of an engagement that did not even exist. That you have laid all of this misery upon my shoulders is... it is unforgivable." She gasped out those last words and took pride in seeing him flinch. He did not deserve her forgiveness, and she did not know what he could do to earn it.

"I know that I do not deserve this boon that I ask," Mr. Darcy said. "But, if you will allow me, I must tell you that all is not lost..."

Elizabeth sat down on the couch with an exasperated sigh. "I do not know what you could possibly do to right these wrongs—but it is Christmas Eve and I cannot send you away without listening..."

Mr. Darcy smiled. "I have labored long over the words you spoke to me in the Netherfield Library. I had been blinded by shame, regret, and misery and had refused to see it for myself. After my Rosemary was lost to me, I did not believe that I was worthy, or able, to love anyone ever again... I did not believe that I could replace her with another woman and disregard her memory. Sophia deserved better— But in depriving myself of love, I also deprived my daughter of the companion she, that we *both*, deserved. When I met you at Grove House, I felt the same spark in my chest as I had the day I met Rosemary. And to see the way Sophia changed in your presence—I knew that perhaps I could feel

whole again without guilt, without regret.”

Elizabeth’s chest tightened at his words. She had said unkind things to Mr. Darcy in the hope that she would shake loose some of his stiffness and his pride, and it seemed that she had done exactly that.

“And as I grew to know you better, and saw you with Sophia more and more, I knew that I should express these feelings... but when I discovered that there might be some competition for your affections I feared that I had waited too long and that it would all be lost to me. I could not bear the thought of having to see your happiness when it was not happiness that I could share. I could not bear the thought of knowing that you would be wed to that spoiled upstart... I could not bear the thought of knowing that you would never be mine and that I would never again hear my name upon your lips—”

“William,” Elizabeth whispered. “What are you trying to say?”

“I am trying to say what I should have upon first seeing you at the Meryton assembly. What I should have proclaimed upon the lake at Netherfield Park... Elizabeth Bennet. I must tell you how much I love and admire you... most ardently. And though I have done nothing to deserve your love in return, I hope at least to gain your forgiveness...”

“Oh—”

Mr. Darcy was pacing the room now, and Elizabeth watched him with wide eyes as he ran his hands through his dark hair.

“I have admitted my guilt to Mr. Bingley, he was angry with me—as he should have been—but from his last letter I know that he is on his way back to Hertfordshire at this very moment, and he is determined to make amends with your sister. He does it against the wishes of his sisters, but with my blessing, and I must tell you how sorry I am for my part in his departure.”

“Mr. Bingley will return to Netherfield Park?” Elizabeth gasped. *Could it be true?*

Mr. Darcy nodded. “I have no doubt that he will present himself

here as soon as he arrives.”

“But... but I must tell Jane,” Elizabeth said, suddenly frantic. “She will be overjoyed. She has spent all these long weeks lamenting his absence and punishing herself for some unknowable transgression that might have sent him away... Oh, William—”

“It was wrong of me,” he said again. “But I hope... most sincerely, that it might be enough to have made this small effort... and the promise that I will do my utmost to prove that I have been changed by knowing you, Elizabeth Bennet. Irreparably changed. And I fear that I will not find any happiness in this life unless I am able to call you ‘wife.’”

“This is most unexpected,” Elizabeth said finally. She rose from her chair and laid a gentle hand upon the gentleman’s arm to pause his movements. “But I find that I am, indeed, inclined to forgive you... it is Christmas, and an unexpected joy is always welcome.”

Mr. Darcy’s shoulders relaxed and a smile spread across his handsome face. “I thank you for that,” he said. “If I may, I would invite you to Netherfield Park, along with your family, for supper. I have told Sophia that you might be otherwise engaged—”

“I am engaged,” Elizabeth interrupted him. “For I have also found that I cannot be happy unless I am able to call you ‘husband.’”

Mr. Darcy’s eyes widened briefly and then he looked up at the boughs above his head. Elizabeth felt a hot blush flood her cheeks—the Kissing Bough—a childish thing that had always meant nothing of any importance, but now... now it did.

Elizabeth’s breath seemed to catch in her throat, and she suddenly felt as though all of the air had been sucked from the room. Her eyes met Mr. Darcy’s, and his gaze was heated and deep. Elizabeth tried to breathe, but as she opened her mouth to say something witty, the gentleman’s head dipped, and his fingers touched her jaw lightly as his lips met hers.

An unexpected joy, indeed, and a promise sealed.

Mr. Darcy took his leave of the house and Elizabeth felt warmed through with a new sort of emotion that she did not quite know how to define. She was to be a wife—and Jane, dear Jane, would have her Mr. Bingley back. All would be well again, and their mother would have no less than three weddings to exclaim over with her friends.

Elizabeth watched Mr. Darcy, *her* Mr. Darcy, mount the chestnut horse that stood patiently in the courtyard and ride away into the darkness and her heart pounded with every hoofbeat.

She wanted to run through the house and shout for Mrs. Hill and Anna to tell them the news, but it would have to wait until Mr. Darcy had spoken to Mr. Bennet... He would return in the morning with Mr. Bingley, he had promised that it would be so, and she had no reason to doubt him.

After so much toil and lamentation it seemed that Elizabeth would have her very deepest love—but it was not easily won, and perhaps that was why it had eluded her for so very long. She had thought that such a thing would wash over her in an instant the moment she saw the gentleman she was meant to be with, but she knew now that such things take time to grow and change. For that was what love was: a growing, changeable connection between two hearts. Some connections were tenuous and easily broken, and others, like the one she shared with Mr. Darcy could not be severed.

She brushed her fingers over her lips and smiled at her reflection in the looking glass. “How very unexpected, indeed,” she murmured.

The End

The Trouble with Lords

A Mysterious Pride and Prejudice Variation

September 1812

Autumn was Elizabeth Bennet's favorite time of year. While

Jane pined for the fresh blossoms of spring, Elizabeth always looked forward to the changing of the leaves and the arrival of colder weather. There was something about the chill in the air that made her feel more alive.

However, this autumn brought with it the reminder that Netherfield Park was still unoccupied, and that Jane's heavy sighs were no doubt connected to that very fact. It pained her to see her sister in such poor spirits, but there was nothing that could be done. The gentleman had disappeared from Hertfordshire, and the letters that Jane had sent to London had gone unanswered.

Whatever friendship might have been implied by Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, it was glaringly obvious to Elizabeth that they had not meant a word of it.

She did not need any assistance to form a poor opinion of Mr. Bingley's sisters, but no matter how she might have felt, Jane would not hear any harsh words said against them.

This autumn, Jane had chosen to focus upon Kitty's prospects. With Lydia married and moved away the house was quieter, but Kitty had borne the brunt of Lydia's absence. Mrs. Bennet had been worried that her younger daughter might have been inspired to the same foolishness as Lydia, but without Lydia's influence, Kitty seemed to lose interest in such things. She still loved dancing, but

her flirtations with officers and other young men had diminished greatly.

Elizabeth was surprised, yet somehow relieved at the change in her sister—perhaps there would be some hope for her after all.

Without a ball or any Regimental frivolities planned, at present their interest had been captured by an invitation that had arrived from Lucas Lodge.

“Mariah Lucas’ birthday—I am certain it will be a very grand affair,” Mrs. Bennet huffed. She had not ceased in her sighs and complaints about the happy event. Elizabeth, however, was looking forward to it.

“Mariah deserves a wonderful party,” Jane said with a smile. “And there is a chance that Charlotte will come to Hertfordshire. It has been ever so long since she has visited.”

Elizabeth nodded and plucked the invitation from her mother’s hand and re-read the delicate handwriting. “It will be lovely. There is no need to pout, Mama.”

Mrs. Bennet shifted in her chair, but the frown did not leave her face. Since Charlotte’s marriage to Mr. Collins, she had become all the more morose in regards to their particular situation. She had abandoned her hopes for her eldest daughters and focused instead upon Kitty, who was the most likely one to next be married. Elizabeth had been insulted at first, but she was also relieved. She did not know if she could bear the thought of being assaulted with yet another proposal—she had already declined two... But only one that was public knowledge. And she intended to keep it as such.

Mr. Darcy’s proposal, and subsequent letter had been—it had been too much. And never enough to forgive him. Though it did not seem as though he wished to have her forgiveness. It had been lucky for all of them that their flight from Brighton had ended

happily. Lydia would never allow them to forget that she had been the first married. Even though he had been contrite in his last visit, Elizabeth was not certain that she trusted Mr. George Wickham, and she was not sure of what he could do to prove that he was, indeed, worthy of her trust.

However, such things did not matter. Mrs. Bennet was overjoyed to have her youngest daughter married, and had enjoyed a great many congratulations and good wishes from her circle of friends. It was not often that she could be an object of envy, but to those friends with unmarried daughters... she was, indeed, very much envied.

"I suppose we shall be celebrating Mariah Lucas' engagement next," Mrs. Bennet huffed.

"At least allow her to have an eighteenth birthday," Elizabeth sighed.

Mrs. Bennet stirred her tea somewhat moodily. "I have no doubt that Mr. Collins will have used his influence to obtain a great many suitors for her."

"And how would he do that, Mama?" Elizabeth asked. She was, for once, genuinely curious as to how her mother had come to this conclusion.

"Why, through Lady Catherine de Bourgh, of course," Mrs. Bennet snapped. "Such position and influence, if you had accepted his proposal just think of the marriages that could have been arranged for your own sisters!"

"Mama, really," Jane said softly.

Elizabeth did her best to cover her smile with the handkerchief she was supposed to be embroidering. Her focus had been entirely elsewhere for the duration of their time in the parlor, and she could not keep the pattern straight.

"Indeed, Mama, I would be able to arrange tedious husbands for all of my sisters," she said.

"There is no need to take that tone," Mrs. Bennet said sharply. "Charlotte Lucas has been very fortunate, indeed. Profiting from

our future misery. I did not think I should see the day when such a thing would come to pass.”

Their mother’s dramatics had not lessened with time, and it seemed that the wound of Mr. Collins’ quick marriage to Charlotte had not yet healed—nor did it seem that it would in the near future. Elizabeth sighed inwardly. She had taken a risk by rejecting Mr. Collins’ proposal, but she could not bear the thought of being tied to such a man for the rest of her days.

Charlotte was a far more patient sort of person, but she did not expect that Mr. Collins had mellowed since marriage. Indeed, since her last visit he only seemed more settled in his demeanor.

“I do hope Charlotte will come for Mariah’s birthday,” Jane said with a smile. “Her last letter—”

“Oh, yes, her last letter,” Mrs. Bennet wailed. “Expecting a child. A child that will someday inherit our home!”

Elizabeth pressed her hand to her forehead and sighed. “Mama...”

“I will not be silent!” she cried. “The indignity! The unfairness of it all!”

“Mama, there is nothing *unfair* about it,” Elizabeth said. Irritation began to creep into her thoughts and she tried to push it away. “If you would have us choose any sort of gentleman to be our husband—would you not have us be happy?”

“Happiness? Oh, my girl. You are still so young. You will learn that duty outweighs all else, especially as comes to marriage! You have a duty to your family!”

How bleak, Elizabeth thought.

“Then I shall be unhappy in my search for happiness,” Elizabeth said firmly. “Perhaps if you would be so kind as to make a list that Jane and I might follow as we search for the gentleman we *should* marry...”

Jane nudged her gently. “Lizzy,” she hissed.

Elizabeth knew that she should not waste the effort in goading their mother; it would only end badly for all involved. She pressed

her lips into a thin line and focused on her whitework stitching. Every stitch was crooked in some way and she swallowed a frustrated sigh.

“Perhaps I should make a list of desirable traits,” Mrs. Bennet sniffed. “That would make everything all the easier, would it not? A simple list. Questions that must be answered, claims that should be verified...”

Elizabeth dropped her needle and fell to snipping threads with her scissors. She would have to start over. A few quick snips, and everything could be set right.

If only everything were as simple.

“Do you really think Mama will give us a *list*,” Jane asked.

Elizabeth pulled a brush through her hair and sighed heavily. “I certainly hope not, for if she does, I fear for any gentleman who might approach us. Each one shall be the ‘perfect one’ and we shall never hear the end of it.”

She thought of the young man in Meryton who had caught her eye in recent weeks. He worked with Mr. Garrett at the shop where she purchased her ink, paper, and quills, and while he had not spoken to her more than was necessary for the transactions to be completed, Elizabeth sensed that he wanted to say something more than his comments upon the weather and the color of feathers she had chosen for her quills. *Could it be so impossible to ask that such things were easier to navigate?*

Jane laughed and sat down on her bed. Her fingers braided her fair hair with deft speed and Elizabeth stared at her reflection in the vanity mirror. “To think. Charlotte Lucas... pregnant. I had thought Lydia to be a mother before her.”

Jane grimaced slightly. "It is entirely strange," she said. "And yet somehow expected. But I do not doubt that Lydia will have some announcement for us before long."

"We are fortunate enough that she was not returned to us in such a state," Elizabeth said ruefully. "I had half-expected such a scandal after their disappearance from Brighton."

Jane's eyes widened slightly. They had spoken of such things in the past—in the dead of night when there was no one to hear them—but neither of them could imagine what might have happened had such a thing occurred. "Indeed... I had hoped that such a thing would not occur. And I am grateful that it did not."

"But Charlotte—she will be happier as a mother, I believe," Elizabeth said. She could not imagine herself as the wife of Mr. Collins, and the thought of being the mother of his children set a shiver up her spine.

"I would agree," Jane said. "Though I do hope that she is happy at Hunsford."

Elizabeth set down the brush and began to braid her own hair as Jane pulled back her coverlet and crawled into bed. "Happiness has many faces," she mused. "When I was last at Hunsford she spoke of how relieved she was that Mr. Collins' business kept him away from the parsonage... I do not think that I could bear to be away from the gentleman I decide to marry."

"Nor I," Jane replied.

Elizabeth felt a pang of regret at the sadness in Jane's voice. No doubt, she had imagined how she and Mr. Bingley would be together... a dream that had faded as the months had flown by. She had hoped there could be some reconciliation, but it seemed to be farther away than ever.

"Perhaps Charlotte will bring some good news with her," Elizabeth said cheerfully. "Mama seems convinced that there will be an engagement for Maria coming from Mr. Collins' influence—do you really think it possible?"

Jane sat up on her pillowed and frowned slightly. "It could be

possible. If he prevailed upon his patroness to lend her advice, which she seems all too willing to give, then there might be some interest... but I daresay that I would not expect such a thing."

Elizabeth rose from the vanity and brought the candle to her bedside. "I believe you are correct," she said. "I do have hope that Mariah will marry well, but I cannot trust that Mr. Collins would be involved in such a thing."

"Far stranger things have happened," Jane said with a sigh. "But I do not hold out any hope that Mr. Collins might be a matchmaker."

"You would think that he would turn his favor upon his dear cousins," Elizabeth laughed. "Surely, he would wish for all of us to be married and away from Longbourn before he becomes its caretaker."

Jane grimaced and then pulled her coverlets up under her chin. "Let us hope that such a thought does not enter his mind," she said.

Elizabeth pulled back her coverlet and climbed into bed, shivering at the chill of the bedclothes on her bare legs. "Indeed, let us hope not. I cannot imagine that he will take our happiness into account."

"If Mama creates her list, we shall have to abandon all hope of such a thing," Jane laughed.

Elizabeth blew out the candle and pulled the coverlet up over her shoulders. They might have laughed about such things, but Elizabeth could not push away a very real worry that such a thing might be in her future.

Jane's breathing was steady and slow, and Elizabeth was quietly jealous of her sister's ability to fall asleep with such speed. She would, no doubt, lie awake for hours thinking of all the mistakes that she had made and replaying conversations that she had wished had gone differently.

Lately, she had spent far too much of her waking hours thinking of the last conversation she had had with Mr. Fitzwilliam

Darcy. An angry confrontation that had culminated in an unthinkable insulting proposal of marriage, and her subsequent refusal of it. She had told no one of what had happened, or of the letter he had sent to her after. She wrestled with the weight of what she knew—but could not decide whether she could reveal to Jane what his role had been in Mr. Bingley's departure from Hertfordshire.

She, herself, so many months later, was still reeling from his bold admission and she could not imagine how Jane would react. But too much time had passed, and it would only be hurtful to reveal the truth now.

No. She would keep her secret. And hope against everything she knew that Mr. Bingley would return and renew his affections for Jane. Or, that her sister would somehow shake off her melancholy and find herself a new gentleman who would appreciate her properly.

Elizabeth sighed heavily and closed her eyes. She had had enough of the drama that swirled through her family. Things had calmed since Lydia's marriage, but Mrs. Bennet seemed to hover upon the expectation of disaster at any given moment. Mariah Lucas' birthday party might provide that next opportunity, but Elizabeth hoped that such things could be put aside, especially if Charlotte made an appearance. It had been entirely too long since they had spoken. If she had any eagerness for the event, it was because of the promise of Charlotte's presence.

Everything else could be shoved aside, at least for the moment.

“Are you certain that you do not wish to walk into

town?” Jane asked the next morning.

Elizabeth looked at her sister quizzically. “Should I?”

“I had thought that you would like to purchase a new quill,” her sister replied with a quick smile.

“Jane... are you teasing me?”

“Perhaps. But he is *very* handsome, and I like the color of his eyes...”

Elizabeth sighed with frustration. “I do not even know his name!”

“Would you like to?” Jane asked gamely.

“How did you— You did not ask him...”

“No, no. Mrs. Archer told me. I did not even ask her, she simply blurted it out in conversation.”

Elizabeth chewed on her lip and busied herself with pushing another pin into her hair.

“Would you like to know?”

“Perhaps.”

“Mr. James Morrow,” Jane said triumphantly. “He is newly arrived in Meryton. Mr. Garrett is his uncle.”

“I see.”

“Will you come into town with me?” she asked again.

Elizabeth pulled a shawl from the wardrobe and threw it over her shoulders. “If you insist, but I shall not be pushed into speaking

to him!”

“I do insist,” Jane laughed. She flung her own shawl over her arm and pushed Elizabeth from the bedchamber they shared. “Come along then, I should like some tea before we go!”

Elizabeth laughed and allowed her sister to hustle her down the corridor and down the stairs. Mary and Kitty were in the parlor, but Mrs. Bennet had not yet made an appearance that morning. Mariah Lucas’ birthday party was only a few short days away and Kitty was working furiously at re-hemming one of Lydia’s discarded dresses. She frowned at the material in her hands and muttered to herself as she tried to place the ribbons she had chosen along the hemline.

“I will never get it right,” she moaned, “someone will comment upon my crooked stitching and I shall never hear the end of it.”

“Use your pins,” Jane admonished her as the ribbon slipped through Kitty’s fingers once more. “Patience is the key. Pin, check your measurements, and then sew.”

Kitty stared blankly at the dress and then back to Jane before she sighed heavily. “I know, it just seems to take so much more time... and I always forget that they are there and prick myself on them while I work!”

“You must concentrate,” Jane said with a smile. “It *will* get easier.”

Mary had not made any effort to re-hem her own dress for the party, but it would do no good to chastise her. If she chose to do any sewing at all, it would be in the privacy of her bedroom where no one could comment upon her stitches. Elizabeth was fairly certain that Mary was accomplished enough at her sewing, but she rarely made a fuss about it, and Kitty seemed to take up so much more space with her own moaning and complaints. There was no doubt in Elizabeth’s mind that Kitty was attempting to fill some of the silence that Lydia had left in her wake, but she hoped that it was merely a fancy that would pass soon enough.

“Where are you going?” Mary asked mildly.

"Into Meryton," Elizabeth replied. "Did you need something?"

"More paper," Mary sighed. "I had borrowed some sheet music from Mariah Lucas to copy, but I have not the paper to copy it."

"We shall, indeed, be happy to get you some paper," Jane said. She winked at Elizabeth who felt her cheeks warm slightly. Of course Jane would find some excuse to go to Mr. Garrett's shop.

Kitty frowned at her dress once more. "I wish I could have a new gown," she said softly. "Maybe for Christmas?"

"I am certain Mama will agree to that," Jane replied. "But for now, keep working! It is coming along beautifully."

The dress was, unfortunately, not coming along as well as Jane had said, but Kitty seemed determined enough. The sleeves lay upon the couch beside her, and the bodice had been re-worked to better fit Kitty's willowy torso.

Elizabeth smiled reassuringly as Kitty turned desperate eyes her way. "Keep working, I am certain you will be happy with the result," she said.

If she was not, Elizabeth would step in to help her, but she was curious to see how Kitty would progress on her own. It was an entirely new thing for Kitty to be able to give her undivided attention to something, and it was clear that she was not entirely sure how to manage it.

"Come, we should be back before Mama comes downstairs," Jane said.

Elizabeth nodded and followed her sister to the foyer. They pulled bonnets over their hair and gloves over their fingers, and as they stepped out of the front door Elizabeth was glad that she had chosen a thicker pair of stockings.

"Winter seems to be in a hurry this year," she said. Jane's breath fogged in the air before her face and she frowned at it.

"Indeed, it does seem so."

They walked side-by-side down the dirt road that led into Meryton, and talked of nothing of consequence beyond Mariah Lucas' party.

Elizabeth could sense that Jane was still not quite herself, but only in the quiet moments in their conversation did the melancholy creep in and reminded Elizabeth of her anger toward Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, and his sisters.

“Did Charlotte write to say that she would come?” Jane asked.

“She did not say one way or the other,” Elizabeth replied. “However, I did tell her that we would all be very pleased to see her.”

“Good. I have missed her company these last months,” Jane said. A smile hovered on her sister’s lips, but Elizabeth could see that it held some sadness. Friends had been in short supply since Charlotte’s departure from Hertfordshire, and Jane had not seemed eager to make any new acquaintances of the families who remained. They knew many of them well enough to greet them in town and speak to them at events and gatherings, but there were no invitations to tea, or surprise guests that came to Longbourn seeking their company. Elizabeth did not mind, but Jane seemed quieter than usual and did not laugh as she used to. It seemed as though it would take more time before she could trust any new acquaintances.

Meryton’s streets were not as busy as Elizabeth had expected, but the hour was still early and many shopkeepers were only just beginning to open their doors and set out their wares.

“We should look at material for new dresses,” Jane said. “Christmastide is on its way, and it has been ever so long since any of us had a new gown. Papa must agree...”

“I cannot see how he could refuse you anything,” Elizabeth replied with a laugh. She was sorely in need of a new gown, but she was content enough with her wardrobe that the thought of its contents did not plague her as it did Kitty.

But Jane was not incorrect, one less young lady in the house

would certainly make room in their budget to accommodate such a request.

They stopped in at Mrs. Archer's shop to peruse the fabrics that had just arrived from London and Jane selected some new ribbons to make rosettes for one of her older dresses. Elizabeth did her best to stay focused on what they were doing, and on what Jane was saying, but she was distracted by nervousness. They would be visiting Mr. Garrett's shop next, and she was not quite certain that she wanted to face Mr. James Morrow that morning.

But the smile on Jane's face made it clear that she would not have much choice in the matter. She took Elizabeth's arm and tucked her purchases into the basket she carried. "Come along, Lizzy, Mary is in need of paper for her music..."

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warming. "Indeed, she is."

They bid Mrs. Archer a good morning, and then Jane tugged Elizabeth across the cobbled street toward Mr. Garrett's bookshop.

The older gentleman was in the midst of watering the flowers that grew in the window boxes.

"Good morning, Mr. Garrett," Jane said brightly. "Is Mr. Morrow about today?"

The bookseller smiled broadly. "Miss Bennet! How lovely to see you this morning. He has gone to London to pick up a new shipment of ink, was there something you wished for me to tell him?"

Jane shook her head and pinched Elizabeth's arm gently. "No, indeed. We were just hoping to say good morning to him as well."

"I shall tell him," Mr. Garrett chuckled as he noted Elizabeth's burning cheeks. "Can I help you with anythin' this morning?"

"Of course," Jane replied. "We are in need of some new paper for Mary's constant scribbling."

Mr. Garrett directed them into the shop and Elizabeth set about choosing paper and new quills from the supplies upon the shelves. She was half grateful that Mr. Morrow was not in Meryton that morning. She had done entirely too much thinking of late, and she

did not need any more weight in her mind. There was enough to worry about without adding unnecessary details to her already overloaded subconscious.

She laid her purchases down upon the counter as Mr. Garrett wrote them down in his ledger. "Miss Bennet," he said as he was wrapping up her items. "I have just remembered, there was something that James left for you should you come into the shop while he was away..."

"Oh?" Elizabeth asked in surprise.

"Whatever could it be?" Jane whispered as Mr. Garrett disappeared into the shop's back room.

"I do not know," Elizabeth whispered back.

The gentleman emerged with a long, slender black box that he placed upon the counter in front of Elizabeth.

"Here it is. He insisted that I give it to you with all urgency if you came in."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and reached for the box hesitantly. She lifted the lid carefully and gasped in surprise as it revealed an elegant quill made from a peacock feather. It had been fitted with a silver nib and lay upon a bed of dark velvet. It was extravagant, and beautiful, and did she not know what to say. Jane's hand gripped her arm and Elizabeth's eyes flickered to Mr. Garrett who chuckled softly.

"I— I cannot accept this," she whispered. "Why would Mr. Morrow—"

Mr. Garrett shrugged. "He did not explain to me, Miss Bennet," he said. "Though, if you will not accept it as a gift, then you may take it as part of your purchase. I will include it with the quills you have already bought."

Elizabeth's cheeks burned as Mr. Garrett wrapped the delicate quill with the others she had chosen.

"But, Mr. Garrett... it is too fine a quill... I cannot—"

The gentleman smiled warmly. "My nephew made it himself. He found the feather while he was out walking one morning, and

the nib is one that he took from his own collection. It was a simple thing, Miss Bennet.”

“Please, thank him for me,” Elizabeth said softly.

“You must thank him yourself the next time you see him,” Mr. Garrett said gruffly. Elizabeth nodded and took the wrapped package from his hands.

She slid it into the basket Jane carried and they left the shop together in an awed silence.

“He made you a beautiful gift, Lizzy,” Jane whispered.

“I know... I do not know why he would do such a thing—”

Jane smiled and pushed Elizabeth gently. “Of course you do, it is a means to begin a conversation.”

“He could have just spoken to me,” Elizabeth said quickly. “It would not take a gift—”

“Perhaps he is not brave enough, so you must be the first to say something.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I do hope not... I did not think that I would be so—”

“Intimidating?”

Elizabeth laughed. “I most certainly am not.”

Jane looped her arm through Elizabeth’s. “Perhaps not to those who know you well,” she said. “But you can be very stern sometimes... And you are usually quite preoccupied with your own thoughts.”

“But a gift? Jane, it is so inappropriate,” Elizabeth protested.

“Then do not think of it as a gift,” Jane said. “Mr. Garrett said so himself that it was part of your purchases. Do not think on the manner of how it was acquired, simply that it is now yours. It is clear enough to me that Mr. Morrow meant for you to think of him each time you used it.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said softly.

On the afternoon of Mariah Lucas' birthday party, Elizabeth did her best to keep her mind upon the tasks before her. Gifts for Mariah had been wrapped in carefully folded muslin and tied with bright ribbons. Kitty was agitated, and would not sit still to have her hair dressed, which was not out of the ordinary. Elizabeth was secretly pleased that she did not have to maintain the patience to do Lydia's hair as well. As much as Kitty fidgeted, she was calm in comparison to her younger sister.

She released the curling tongs and slid a pin into Kitty's auburn hair. "I do wish you would hold still," she said tersely.

"I am trying," Kitty whined. "But the curling tongs are so hot... I am all sweaty."

Elizabeth pressed her hand down upon Kitty's shoulder to keep her in the chair. "Be still." Kitty groaned and kicked her feet, making Elizabeth's task almost impossible. "If you do not stop moving, I will burn your scalp, and I do not want to do any such thing!"

"I am sorry," Kitty moaned. "I am nervous."

"What are you nervous about?" Elizabeth asked. She was annoyed with Kitty, but if talking would calm her down that would be beneficial for both of them.

Kitty sighed dejectedly. "I have not been to any parties without Lydia—"

"I see," Elizabeth said softly. "I should have thought you would be happy for the opportunity to do as you like for once."

"I thought so as well," Kitty said. "But now that we are about to depart, all I can think of is what Lydia would want to do. She knows all the best dancing music, and is not too shy to ask the musicians to play it. I fear that I shall never be able to be as bold."

"That is not a bad thing," Elizabeth said with a smile. "It will take some time to get used to her absence."

"It will, indeed," Kitty pouted. "I do hope that Mary will not

demand to play anything.”

“As do I,” Elizabeth said. “But she has not put aside her music, so we can hope that she will not feel the need to bring it along.”

“Do you think there will be dancing?” Kitty asked suddenly. “It did not say in the invitation, but I hope there will be dancing so that no one will have the opportunity to examine my gown too closely. I should like to be dancing so they will not be able to tell that my hems are uneven.”

“They are very well done, indeed,” Elizabeth said reassuringly. “You have done an admirable job.”

“Lydia was shorter than I,” Kitty continued, but it was not too much of a hardship to alter the bodice... the hem was far too troublesome...”

“Perhaps you will have a new gown for Christmastide,” Elizabeth interrupted her. “Jane believes that Papa will be very amenable to such a request.”

Kitty twisted in her chair to smile up at her sister, and Elizabeth narrowly avoided burning Kitty’s ear with the curling tongs. She gritted her teeth to keep from saying anything and set the tongs down on the vanity. She worked quickly to put the last pins into Kitty’s hair and set a spray of white baby’s breath into her curls. “There, now you may go down and collect your shawl. Mama will want to leave shortly.”

Kitty bounced out of the chair and kissed Elizabeth quickly on the cheek before running out of the room and down the corridor.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and pulled her gloves out of the wardrobe. She was looking forward to the party, but it was the chance to see Charlotte that she was most excited for.

She checked her reflection in the vanity mirror and then sighed heavily as her mother’s voice echoed up the stairs.

“The carriage is here, Lizzy! *Do* hurry!”

Elizabeth pulled her gloves up over her elbows and then hurried out of the room and down the stairs to the foyer where her mother and sisters waited.

The carriage waited in the courtyard and Mrs. Bennet snatched a bundle of paper out of Mary's hands before she could slip out the door.

"You will not be bringing your music with you," Mrs. Bennet snapped.

Mary protested, but Mrs. Bennet would not hear it and Elizabeth was grateful for her mother's sharp eyes.

"Hurry," Kitty cried from the carriage. She had taken Lydia's place as the first to dive into the carriage when the family was going on an outing and Mary rolled her eyes as she stomped through the gravel.

Jane gripped Elizabeth's arm and squeezed gently. "It shall be a wonderful day," she said.

"I do believe it," Elizabeth replied with a smile.

Lucas Lodge was nestled in a quiet glade just north of

Meryton's town centre, and Elizabeth had been in love with the old estate since she had been a young girl. Sir William had taken on a large project when he had acquired the estate, and the renovations that had been undertaken had given a derelict old home a new life.

The gardens were ancient, and Elizabeth loved to wander through the old rose bushes that twined over the crumbling stone walls.

As they walked into the house, it was clear that Lady Lucas had made the whole main floor of the house into the venue for Mariah's party. Mrs. Bennet walked directly to Lady Lucas' side to begin her conversations.

Standing near her mother, Charlotte stood to the side of the group of ladies with a cup of tea in her hand and Elizabeth felt her chest tighten as she saw the swell of Charlotte's pregnancy beneath the muslin of her dress. She had not changed much since her marriage, but her manner of dress had become more modest and her smiles seemed slower and more measured.

"Charlotte!"

Jane's exclamation drew their friend's attention, and Elizabeth could not help but smile herself as Charlotte turned to them.

"Lizzy! Jane!"

They embraced Charlotte gently and exclaimed over her growing pregnancy.

Charlotte's cheeks pinkened and she laid her hand upon her swollen stomach. "The little one is quite active today," she said with a tired smile. "It must be all the excitement."

"He is just eager to meet his grandmama," Lady Lucas sang out. The ladies gathered around her laughed, but Charlotte's smile was thin.

"How long until the child arrives?" Elizabeth asked.

"Christmastide," Charlotte replied. "Lady Catherine has been kind enough to engage an accoucheur to attend me. Dr. Gannet."

"How... wonderful," Jane said after a small pause. She and Elizabeth exchanged a glance. Elizabeth had hoped that Lady Catherine de Bourgh's interference in the daily life of the parsonage would decrease as Charlotte became more comfortable with her role at the parsonage, but it did not seem to be so.

"It is very kind of her," Charlotte said. "She has taken an... active interest in my pregnancy."

Elizabeth laid a hand upon Charlotte's arm and squeezed gently. "I am certain that she wants only the best for you. And Mr. Collins, of course."

"Of course."

"And Mr. Collins, how has he reacted to this... change?"

Elizabeth looked at Jane in surprise. She, herself, had wanted to avoid any mention of Mr. Collins, but it seemed that her sister had other ideas.

Charlotte smiled at the question, but the expression seemed strained. "He is thrilled, of course, and wishes for a boy, as my mother does. But he is often away on business, or seeing to Lady Catherine's needs. I am often alone at the parsonage."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "But Charlotte, that is far from ideal —"

"It suits me very well, indeed," she said softly. She set down her teacup and took Elizabeth's hand. "It is my hope that the child will be a girl. I think I should like to have the company of a daughter."

Elizabeth smiled reassuringly. She could envision Charlotte as

the mother of a quiet little girl with a sweetly serious face and stoic demeanor. It was difficult to picture her chasing after a raucous little boy. “That would, indeed, be a wonderful thing,” she said.

Their attention turned back to the party as Mariah Lucas was escorted into the parlor. The room erupted in applause and shouts of good wishes. Charlotte, of course, smiled and clapped for her sister, and wound her way through the crowd to lay kisses upon her flushed cheeks.

“I shall see her engaged by Twelfth Night,” Lady Lucas said loudly. Mariah seemed not to hear her mother’s assertion, but the ladies in her circle laughed appreciatively and began to talk of matchmaking for their own children. Elizabeth sighed and decided that it was time to locate the punch table. Perhaps after a glass of punch she would be able to locate Charlotte once more and they could continue their conversation.

Kitty squealed with delight as the music began and couples began to organize themselves for dancing. Mary had seated herself in a corner and Elizabeth sighed inwardly to see the dour expression on her sister’s face. One day, perhaps, they would find an activity that Mary enjoyed—but until then, Mrs. Bennet would continue to lecture her about her distasteful expressions and continual frowns.

“Lizzy, I have a favor to ask,” Charlotte said softly.

Charlotte had found Elizabeth at the glass door of the conservatory, and they had escaped the crush of the party to walk amongst the carefully manicured rows of hedges and garden beds that surrounded Lucas Lodge.

“Indeed, I shall be happy to oblige you,” Elizabeth replied.

"It is just... with the baby... I find that being alone in the parsonage is ever so much more oppressive. I should like to ask... if you will come to Hunsford and be with me when the child is born..."

The question was asked in a nervous rush and Elizabeth blinked in surprise. "Over Christmastide?"

"Mr. Collins will not hear of my spending the holiday in Hertfordshire with my family—the accoucheur will not travel farther than Rosings Park." Charlotte said. "If it would not be too much of an imposition—"

Of course, Elizabeth thought immediately, Mr. Collins would never miss an opportunity to take advantage of his patroness' condescension.

"No. No, indeed. It will not be." She smiled and reached for Charlotte's hand. "I shall make all the arrangements. And you are certain that Mr. Collins will not mind?"

Charlotte shook her head. "No, I do not think so. He speaks of you fondly, and I am certain that he will make no argument. My condition seems to be somewhat of a... mystery to him, and he will be glad of a distraction."

Charlotte's pronouncement was not reassuring, and Elizabeth could hear the weight of sadness in her friend's voice. *How could she refuse such a request?*

"I shall be glad of it," Elizabeth said. "A change of scenery will be most welcome, indeed."

Her words brought a smile to Charlotte's face, and Elizabeth's heart lightened somewhat. "Mr. Collins is very certain that Lady Catherine will host a grand supper for Christmastide," Charlotte said. "He has spoken endlessly of the decorations and preparations that her Ladyship undertakes every holiday season, and I confess that I am looking forward to seeing it for myself."

Lucas Lodge was always richly decorated for Christmas celebrations, and she could see some measure of homesickness in Charlotte's eyes.

“We shall decorate the parsonage together,” she said. She squeezed Charlotte’s fingers gently. “It will be wonderful.”

“Thank you, Lizzy,” Charlotte whispered. “Your presence shall be the most precious gift of all.”

“Nonsense,” Elizabeth said with a laugh. “Your child will be the gift, and I cannot wait to help you welcome her into the world. Have you thought of a name?”

Charlotte’s cheeks flushed pink. “I have, but I have not settled upon one as yet.”

“Tell me all of them,” Elizabeth demanded. “We shall choose the perfect name.”

Elizabeth’s attempt at distracting her friend from melancholy thoughts seemed to have worked, and they fell to discussing happier topics, but even as she laughed with Charlotte she could not shake the feeling that there was something more behind her friend’s quiet sadness. She was determined to discover what truly lay at the heart of Charlotte’s change in demeanor, but the only way to do that was to go to Hunsford.

“Y ou will do no such thing!”

Mrs. Bennet’s cry of indignation made Elizabeth wince.

“Mama, you must be reasonable,” she said mildly. “Charlotte has begged for my companionship during a very difficult time—”

“Difficult time?” Mrs. Bennet huffed. “She is *pregnant*, Lizzy. I, myself, have been pregnant no less than seven times, and not once did I beg for my friends to attend me as though I were a frightened nightingale.”

“She is all alone at Hunsford,” Elizabeth protested. “And Mr. Collins will not allow her to travel home to Lucas Lodge. She would do the same for me if I asked her to, and I will not abandon her.”

Mrs. Bennet let out a furious breath. “The heir to Longbourn,” she said bitterly. “I will not hear of it.”

“Mama, you will have to get used to the idea that Charlotte will be the mistress of this house when Papa dies,” Jane said gently. “I am certain that she will ensure that we are treated fairly. And if Lizzy is endeared further to her by being present for the child’s birth, then it can only be for the best. Besides, Charlotte is one of our dearest friends...”

“I know, Jane, I know,” Mrs. Bennet sighed, “but it vexes me to no end and I have no doubt that your father finds nothing but amusement in the strain that has been put upon my nerves!”

“Shall I ask Papa if he will permit me to go?” Elizabeth asked,

eager to change the subject and leave the room.

Mrs. Bennet waved her handkerchief dismissively. "As you wish, no one in this house cares for my feelings or the state of my poor nerves. Go, go!"

Elizabeth left the room as quickly as she could and strode down the corridor toward her father's study. Mr. Bennet had borne the brunt of their mother's complaints about Mr. Collins' marriage to Charlotte Lucas, and Elizabeth feared that her mother would never tire of the pain the subject caused her. If she could only think beyond her own fears perhaps things would be different. But it would be easier to make cheese out of a stone than to change her mind.

She knocked gently on the closed door of Mr. Bennet's study and waited for him to respond before opening the door to step inside.

"Ah, Lizzy. I can hear your mother's complaints echoing through the corridors. Pray, what have you done to provoke her wailing today?" Mr. Bennet's voice was jovial and Elizabeth saw the twinkle in his eye as he spoke. He delighted in tormenting his wife, but she knew that it was done out of love as well as some small sense of pleasure in vexing her.

"I have done nothing," she protested with a smile. "Charlotte Lucas has requested that I come to Hunsford to be with her for the birth of her child."

"Mrs. Collins is with child," he mused. "What excellent news. And I trust that Mrs. Bennet has declined your request to leave."

"Most vehemently."

"Then I have no choice but to agree," Mr. Bennet said. He sat back in his chair and set down his quill. "And when will you depart?"

"Some weeks before Christmas, I believe," she replied. "Charlotte fears that the child will be born over Christmastide, and I should like to be there with her to ease her nervousness."

"I believe that we may be able to spare you," he said. "Your

mother will wail and lament that you are not here to be troubled by the usual excitements of the Regimental Ball and the Christmas assembly..."

"I have no doubt," Elizabeth said with a smile. "But there will be revels much the same as there were last year, and they will come again the year following."

"Indeed they shall," Mr. Bennet agreed. "You have my blessing, and I trust that you will carry my good wishes to Mr. Collins. And my hope that the child is a girl."

"Why, Papa?"

"That he might know the particular joy of being a father to daughters as silly as my own."

Elizabeth laughed and came around her father's desk to kiss him atop his balding head. "Let us hope that he is similarly blessed," she said. "Charlotte has hopes for a girl as well."

"Then let it be so," he said with a smile as he plucked his quill from the desk and began to write in his ledger once more.

Elizabeth left her father to his work and closed the door of the study as quietly as she could behind her. Mr. Bennet's hope that Charlotte's child would be a girl held some hint of bitterness—to know that Mr. Collins could find himself in the very same situation as the Bennet's currently enjoyed would be a small measure of revenge.

Daughters were an uncertain commodity, and Elizabeth was no stranger to that fact. The best they could hope for was to be married well so that they would not be a burden upon the household. One of them would certainly have to look after their mother when the time came for Mr. Collins to assume control of Longbourn, but that would be a discussion for a later date.

For now, Elizabeth could content herself with the fact that she had her father's permission to attend Charlotte for the birth of her child, and that was enough. A small victory, and something she was looking forward to with much anticipation.

She had spent enough Christmases in Hertfordshire, and the

change of scenery would be refreshing. The prospect of attending yet another Christmas assembly, and yet another Regimental Ball was entirely exhausting. More dresses to be re-hemmed, more time spent sitting instead of dancing where there were too many ladies for the gentlemen available.

It was the same every year.

Except, of course, for the year that Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy had come to Hertfordshire. That year was one that Elizabeth wished, quite vehemently, that she could forget. Memories of those months were only painful, and she wished that she could be rid of them.

November 1812

The snow upon the courtyard glittered in the early morning sunshine as Elizabeth waited for the arrival of the carriage that would take her to Hunsford. The journey was not long, but it would be long enough that she would arrive exhausted and out of sorts.

Jane had been invited to London to stay with their aunt and uncle at Gracechurch Street, and they would travel together for the first part of the journey.

“I do hope you have packed warm enough stockings,” Jane said. She looked down at Elizabeth’s bulging valise and shoved at it with her foot.

“As do I,” Elizabeth said ruefully. “Truthfully, I could not think of what I should pack. I have not spent a winter anywhere but Longbourn, and I am used to the type of cold that settles into our bedchamber at night... I am ill prepared for any other discomforts!”

Jane laughed lightly and pulled her bonnet over her fair hair. "I am certain that Charlotte will ensure that you are very comfortable. I cannot imagine that Lady Catherine de Bourgh would allow the parsonage to be a dank, uncomfortable place to live."

"I doubt it very much," Elizabeth replied. "Her Ladyship's presence will surely be felt in every corner and cupboard in the house."

"Down to the very window ledges."

Mrs. Bennet refused to come down to bid them goodbye, but Kitty, Mary, and Mr. Bennet all stood in the foyer as Elizabeth and Jane walked out into the snow-covered gravel to meet the carriage as it rolled into the courtyard. "Give my best to Mr. Collins," Mr. Bennet said mildly. "I have not written him a letter, but please assure him that I have received all of his and that I shall reply shortly."

Elizabeth covered her mouth to keep from laughing. "And just how many letters have gone unanswered, Papa?" she asked.

"I have lost count," her father replied. "But I seem to recall that many of them did not require my comment at all. Although I am certain that he believes otherwise."

"I shall be certain to tell him," Elizabeth said.

"Jane, I do have letters for Mr. Gardiner," he said. He passed Jane a small packet which she took from his hand and tucked carefully into her valise. "I shall be looking forward to their arrival for the Christmas season."

"Of course, Papa," Jane said.

Elizabeth looked up to her mother's bedchamber window and saw the curtains twitch. She smiled brightly at the shape behind the curtains. *Oh, Mama.*

Elizabeth kissed Mary, Kitty, and their father goodbye and then

climbed up into the carriage after Jane.

"I do hope Mama will be alright," Jane said. "It is not usual for both of us to be allowed to be away from Longbourn at the same time."

The carriage driver shut the door and the carriage lurched as he clambered back up into his seat.

Elizabeth waved to her younger sisters and sat back against the seat as the driver's whip snapped and the carriage began to move. "I am certain that Mama will be quite well. She will wail and moan for a few days, but as soon as she begins to focus upon Kitty's prospects and the upcoming assembly and Regimental Ball, she will have forgotten all about us. You will return from London refreshed and renewed and the house will already be decorated for Christmastide."

"I do hope so," Jane sighed. "It is not like her to stay in her room like this..."

"It is, indeed," Elizabeth said with a laugh. "She has done it on several occasions. Remember when Papa was leaving for Brighton and refused to bring us with him? She would not come down for three days, and then Lady Lucas hosted a salon and she promptly forgot all about Papa's absence and the insult of not being able to go to the seaside, and the salon was all she could talk about. She simply requires a distraction."

"I suppose you are right," Jane mused. "She *was* very upset about Papa going to Brighton."

"Kitty was convinced that she might never forgive him."

"That salon was dreadful," Jane laughed. "I still cringe when I think about the performances we witnessed."

Elizabeth made an unladylike noise. "I still cringe when I think of the performance I gave."

Jane laughed and leaned against Elizabeth's shoulder. "And this is why we are not invited to any of Lady Lucas' salons," she said breathlessly.

"Indeed, and I am grateful for it!"

Jane sighed heavily and looked out the carriage window as the town of Meryton rolled past. "Do you think that I shall see Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst in London?" she asked suddenly.

Elizabeth blinked in surprise. "Would you want to see them?"

Jane looked thoughtful for a moment and then shook her head. "I do not know, but I do not think so. I could not begin to think of what I might say to them."

"I can think of *many* things I should like to say to them," Elizabeth said stiffly.

"Lizzy," Jane admonished. "I have put aside my anger toward them. I believe I have settled upon a sort of sadness that they were not amenable to being my friend."

"I will hold my anger for as long as I can," Elizabeth said. "If you cannot be angry with them, then I shall be angry on your behalf. It is the very least that I can do."

"And I thank you for it," Jane said, "though it is not necessary."

"It feels necessary to me."

Jane laughed and laid her hand upon Elizabeth's arm. "Your loyalty is very heartily appreciated."

"And what shall you do in London?" Elizabeth asked.

"I have not yet decided," Jane said with a sigh. "Our aunt has a great many ideas for walks and outings, but I fear that the threat of harsh weather will delay some of our enjoyment of the city."

"You must see if you can find Mary some new sheet music for Christmas," Elizabeth said. "She has borrowed everything she copies from Mariah Lucas, and I must say that the girl has very bland taste. Mary seems not to mind, but I have grown tired of Chopin."

"I believe we all have," Jane said with a smile. "I shall see if I can find something more... enjoyable."

"Lydia would demand that she learn some country dances. Perhaps something a little livelier than her usual fare would brighten the household a little more."

"I cannot disagree with you. I am certain that our aunt will be

able to aid me in my quest.”

They fell to other topics of conversation, but Elizabeth wished that she could say something to bolster her sister’s spirits. Mention of Miss Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Louisa Hurst had only served as a reminder that Jane had not fully given over her thoughts of Mr. Bingley and his absence from Netherfield Park. It had been a year to the day since they had departed Hertfordshire, but Jane’s thoughts of Mr. Bingley seemed just as fresh as the day they had left.

Elizabeth had planned to stay one night in London with her aunt and uncle before continuing on to Hunsford, and she was as eager to see the Gardiners as Jane was.

Mrs. Gardiner was welcoming, as always, and she had many questions about life in Hertfordshire, and about Elizabeth’s journey to Hunsford. Mr. Gardiner was kept busy at his warehouses and could not join them for supper, and Elizabeth missed his jovial laughter at the supper table.

In the morning, when she was readying for her departure, Mrs. Gardiner took Elizabeth aside.

“Should I be worried for Jane?” she asked quietly.

“I should think not,” Elizabeth replied. “Jane has not been herself since last Christmas, but I cannot find any cause other than Mr. Bingley’s sudden departure from Hertfordshire.”

“Was there any promise made of an engagement?”

“Not that I was aware of. But that does not mean it had not been spoken of. If he had departed in order to avoid such responsibility I would think that some notice would have come of a speedy marriage to another young woman...”

“And why would you receive such a message?” Mrs. Gardiner seemed confused by the notion and Elizabeth smiled wryly.

“I would not doubt that the gentleman’s sisters would be very

certain to pass along such information. It would, no doubt, bring them a great amount of satisfaction to know that they had hurt Jane all the more.”

“What horrid creatures they must be,” Mrs. Gardiner said vehemently.

“I would agree.”

“Is that all that is troubling her?”

“I do hope so,” Elizabeth said, but she was not certain of her answer. It seemed the simplest one, but it seemed very strange that Jane should be so melancholy after so much time. She might have loved the gentleman, but surely such a thing would fade somewhat after such a long absence.

“I shall do my best to cheer her,” Mrs. Gardiner said firmly. “And I shall also discourage her from making another journey to their residence. It grieved me very deeply to see her so upset after her last attempt to contact them.”

“They are not worth Jane’s time, and yet I cannot seem to convince her of that fact. She is entirely too good, and they do not deserve her friendship.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded firmly. “I most certainly agree with that. It pains me to see her so upset. She is very unlike herself.”

“I have noticed the same,” Elizabeth said. “I had hoped that she would shake off this melancholy, but she seems to have taken Mr. Bingley’s departure to heart...”

“A very great shame,” Mrs. Gardiner said sadly. “I would like to see all of my dear nieces happily married.”

“I am certain you shall, at some stage,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “But you must be patient! We cannot all be swept away by lucky chances.”

“Indeed not,” Mrs. Gardiner said. “Although I would not thank luck for Lydia’s marriage.”

“Would you not?” Elizabeth said with some surprise. “I had thought her very fortunate—I dare not think on what might have happened had they not been married.”

Mrs. Gardiner's lips pressed into a thin line. "Indeed. Nor do I."

Elizabeth had hoped that her aunt would explain her statement, but she seemed unwilling to do so, and Elizabeth did not want to press the issue. The topic of Lydia's marriage was not a favored one, and the less said about Mr. Wickham, and the matter of their disappearance from Brighton, the better.

"I do hope you have a pleasant journey to Hunsford," Mrs. Gardiner said briskly. "I trust that you will write?"

"Of course," Elizabeth embraced her aunt tightly and kissed her upon the cheek. "I shall return to Longbourn after Charlotte's child is born. I do hope that you will still be there when I do."

"I shall hope for the same," her aunt said with a smile.

Jane came down the stairs just as the carriage arrived, and she pulled Elizabeth into her arms for a quick embrace. "Do give Charlotte my love," she said. "I am eager to hear all the news of the child and how the parsonage has changed since last you were there."

"I shall write as soon as I arrive," Elizabeth promised. "Try to enjoy yourself," she admonished her sister. "It will not be long before you are back in Hertfordshire with nothing to look forward to aside from the Regimental Ball."

Jane laughed lightly. "Perhaps I enjoy Regimental Balls," she teased.

Elizabeth made a face but did not argue. She was likely the only Bennet sister, aside from Mary, who did not enjoy such things. Mr. Wickham and his actions had given her a decidedly sour outlook on officers and military men, and she could not stomach the thought of dancing with another gentleman in a red jacket.

Her sisters could do as they liked, but she wanted no part of it.

The footman came to claim her valise and Elizabeth followed him down the stairs to the waiting carriage. She waved to Jane and her aunt and then settled herself against the seat for the journey to Hunsford.

Elizabeth departed Gracechurch Street with a lighter heart than

when she had arrived, and she was grateful for her aunt's care of Jane. She hoped that Mrs. Gardiner would be able to bring Jane out of her melancholy and awaken some of her passion for life once more. Perhaps a change of scenery would do just that.

As the carriage rolled through London, Elizabeth's thoughts wandered back to Meryton and the young man in Mr. Garrett's shop. Mr. James Morrow. She had not seen him to thank him properly for the quill he had gifted her. It was nestled in her writing box—too precious to use for her everyday correspondence. She wanted to use it, but she was almost afraid to do so. All of her words seemed unworthy of so fine an instrument.

It was a lovely gift, but the fact that he had given it at all was foreign to her. They had not exchanged more than a few words in the past, and she had never spoken to him alone... It was almost improper for him to give her a gift, but she did not dare return it or pretend as though she was not pleased that he had thought enough of her to create it with her in mind.

She was flattered, to be sure... Did he expect that she would speak to him now? Was it a means to a different end? She could not be certain, and her cheeks warmed at the thought of speaking to him. What would they talk about? What if he was fond of things that she hated? Perhaps that would have been easier.

Could she see herself as the wife of a poor man? What fortune did he have? What prospects?

Elizabeth sighed heavily and leaned her head back against the seat cushions. It would do her no good to dwell upon such things, for there was nothing she could do about it. She would have to wait until her return to Hertfordshire and pluck up the courage to speak with him. Or... not.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and tried to think of something other than Mr. James Morrow's smiling face. He was certainly handsome enough to warrant consideration... She made a face and tried to push away those thoughts. She had more pressing matters to worry about. Namely, how she would manage to maintain a pleasant

demeanor with Lady Catherine de Bourgh in such close proximity.

C harlotte was waiting at the parsonage gate to welcome her

when the carriage rolled down the dirt road. It was late afternoon, and the sun was low in the sky. Elizabeth's stomach rumbled as she stepped out of the carriage and smelled supper cooking. Charlotte's smile was warm and broad, and Elizabeth's heart lifted to see that she looked truly happy. Her pregnancy was well advanced, and it was clear enough that not much time remained until the child would arrive.

"Lizzy! I am so pleased to see you!"

Elizabeth ran the short distance between the carriage and the front gate to embrace her friend tightly. The carriage driver set her valise down upon the path and then clambered back up into his seat and snapped his whip over the horse's backs to set them in motion once more.

The carriage pulled away and Elizabeth sighed happily. Hunsford was, as it had been the last time she visited, a peaceful place. Something that would soon change when the child arrived.

"How are you feeling?" Elizabeth asked.

"A little tired," Charlotte replied. "But nothing more. Dr. Gannet says that I am progressing remarkably well, and the child seems healthy. He seems convinced that it shall be a boy, but I maintain my hope for a girl. I do not think I am equipped to deal with a boy... at least, not yet."

"I shall hold out the same hope," Elizabeth said with a smile.

She gripped Charlotte's hands gently and noted how cold they were.

"Come now, we should go inside and get in front of a fire. I have been too long in a cold carriage, and you have been waiting outside for me!"

"It was not long at all," Charlotte protested. Elizabeth lifted her valise from the path and followed her friend into the parsonage.

"But where is Mr. Collins?" she asked. "I had expected to see him."

"He is at Rosings Park with her Ladyship," Charlotte said. "He is very often away from the house until very late at night, and sometimes I do not see him until the following morning. Unless I sleep late, and then I might not see him at all."

Charlotte did not sound upset about such a thing, but Elizabeth would have been sorely disappointed if her own marriage progressed in the same manner.

"I can smell supper from the garden," Elizabeth said as Charlotte opened the door. "You have become a wonderful cook!"

Charlotte laughed and stepped into the parsonage. "No, indeed. Lady Catherine has been kind enough to lend us the services of a cook and a housekeeper until the baby is born. I shall be permitted to engage a kitchen maid soon enough, Mr. Collins has promised me. With her Ladyship's blessing, of course."

"Of course," Elizabeth murmured.

Now that Charlotte had become more comfortable at Hunsford, the parsonage had taken on a more comfortable atmosphere. The severity of the original decor had been softened by new curtains and the addition of patterned cushions and other feminine touches.

"You have made this a very comfortable home," Elizabeth observed.

Charlotte laughed somewhat stiffly. "Her Ladyship would not agree with you," she said. "She has made many requests for it to be changed, but I cannot bring myself to do so. Mr. Collins has spoken of it on several occasions."

“I am very pleased that you have resisted her Ladyship’s attempts to invade your home,” Elizabeth said with a reassuring smile.

“As much as I am able. Her Ladyship has an opinion on every aspect of our lives.” Charlotte sighed as she eased herself into a chair and Elizabeth helped her to sit down. “I do not imagine she will lessen her involvement once the child arrives.”

“I would have to agree,” Elizabeth said ruefully. “Her Ladyship’s accoucheur will be very helpful will he not?”

“He will, indeed,” Charlotte replied. “Though I would have preferred a midwife or the company of my own mother. I do not expect that she will want to travel at this time of year.”

Elizabeth patted her friend’s hand. “I shall be at your side. I do hope that I shall be enough.”

“I am relieved to have your help,” Charlotte replied. Her smile was small and exhausted, but it was a smile nonetheless.

Elizabeth and Charlotte ate their dinner meal together, and it was not until well after the dishes had been cleared away and the kitchen maid that Lady Catherine had so graciously sent down from Rosings Park had made her swift departure that Mr. Collins made his appearance.

He greeted them effusively and placed a loud kiss upon Charlotte’s cheek as he entered the parlor where they were seated with their tea.

“I must tell you, her Ladyship has been very pleased by the news that you have come to visit us, Cousin,” he said with a smile that made Elizabeth shiver slightly. “‘Collins,’ she said to me, ‘Collins, you must have Miss Bennet come to Rosings for tea so that I might speak to her of the proper ways to care for a woman in

Mrs. Collins' condition.' For you see, her Ladyship has a particular interest in these types of affairs. And is familiar with my dear Charlotte's delicate condition."

"I am not delicate," Charlotte huffed. "Merely uncomfortable."

Mr. Collins seemed not to have heard his wife's words and continued to speak about Lady Catherine's special interest in Charlotte's condition.

"As you may very well know, Lady Catherine has been kind enough to engage the services of her own accoucheur to advise and oversee the safe delivery of my son." He grabbed for Charlotte's hand and kissed it wetly, and Elizabeth hoped for the third time that Charlotte would have a daughter. A daughter would give her comfort, and would, with any luck, not remind her too much of Mr. Collins.

"I am, of course, delighted to be invited," Elizabeth said. She was not, in fact, delighted, but Mr. Collins would not have accepted any other response to his announcement.

"I shall be pleased to convey your good wishes to her in the morning," Mr. Collins said with a gracious smile. "I have no doubt that it will be a pleasant distraction."

"Charlotte, you will come with me, of course," Elizabeth said.

Charlotte opened her mouth to reply, but closed it in an instant as Mr. Collins leaned forward across the table. "Oh, no, indeed," Mr. Collins interrupted. "Her Ladyship is of the mind that a young woman in this condition should not exert herself more than is necessary. And the motion of the carriage to convey her to Rosings Park would not be beneficial to the child."

Mr. Collins patted Charlotte's hand distractedly and Elizabeth could see her friend take a sharp breath as she attempted to keep from replying to his ridiculous words. Elizabeth knew as well as anyone that Charlotte need not have been worried about such things. She had already told Elizabeth that as soon as Mr. Collins departed the parsonage in the morning she would go out into the garden to work in the beds and combat the weeds that threatened

to spring up between the vegetables and herbs that had been so carefully planted there.

“As you say,” Charlotte replied softly. “Lady Catherine has been very conscious of my health and the well-being of the child.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said. “And will Miss de Bourgh be in attendance?”

She was desperate for the presence of any other guest to dampen the blow of Lady Catherine’s presence. Her pale, silent daughter would be of no help in conversation, but perhaps her mother’s behavior would be somewhat tempered with her presence. Another impossible wish.

“Alas, Miss de Bourgh has been quite ill of late,” Mr. Collins said with a smile that was, no doubt, meant to convey his sympathy but the opposite effect was achieved.

“Oh dear,” Elizabeth said. “I am sorry to hear it. Is it known what malady affects her so?”

“It is difficult to say,” Mr. Collins said. “Her Ladyship has, of course, engaged the very best doctors from London and Paris to see to Miss de Bourgh’s condition, but as yet, none have been able to locate the cause of her illness. She will be ill in the evening, and then rally in the morning, only to be ill again come tea time. It is very sad.”

“How awful,” Elizabeth breathed. “Might it be a seasonal malady? Something brought on by the sudden arrival of winter?”

“Oh no, indeed,” Mr. Collins said somewhat indignant. “Rosings Park is warm and dry, and there is no need to fear that such a thing could be possible. I have it on the best authority that it is something that will pass in time. You needn’t worry. Miss de Bourgh is being given the very best of care. Lady Catherine herself has seen to the doctors who have come to Rosings Park to see her.”

Elizabeth smiled weakly. “As you have said. “A mystery, indeed.”

It would do no good to argue with Mr. Collins or attempt to make any attempt to question him further. She had known of two

young ladies who had taken ill in Meryton due to the very fact that their homes were cold and full of draughts that entered the house through windows and cracks in the walls. One was carried off by chills that had settled into her bones, but the other recovered as soon as she was moved into her grandfather's home in London. *If it were not the environment, then what else could it be?*

She did not know Anne de Bourgh, but Elizabeth did not like to hear of any sickness. It was entirely too often that a simple illness, when left untreated or unmarked, could lead to a preventable death.

Mr. Collins shook an admonishing finger at her. "You shall see, Cousin. Before Christmastide has passed, Miss de Bourgh will be rosy cheeked and healthy once more. Lady Catherine is certain of it."

"Indeed, I cannot argue with such an authority," Elizabeth said.

The conversation drifted to Mr. Collins' work at the rectory and the preparations underway for the Christmastide celebrations and Elizabeth was able to respond only minimally. Mr. Collins was undeterred in his one-sided conversation, and Elizabeth chose to focus on Charlotte and when her friend began to appear more exhausted than usual, she interrupted the parson's discussion.

"If you will forgive me, Mr. Collins, I believe Charlotte should go and lie down. It has been a taxing day for her."

Mr. Collins scrambled to his feet as Elizabeth rose from her chair to help Charlotte stand. Charlotte clung to Elizabeth's arm gratefully and turned her cheek to Mr. Collins to accept his kiss.

"I shall not be ready for bed for quite some time," he said. "Should you require my assistance, I will be in my study."

"Thank you, Mr. Collins, I will see to Charlotte's needs," Elizabeth said reassuringly.

"Lady Catherine will be expecting you for tea at ten o'clock sharp," Mr. Collins said to remind her of her obligation.

"Of course," Elizabeth said as she led Charlotte to the stairs. "I shall not be late."

“Indeed not, her Ladyship does not take kindly to delays.”

The wealthy never did, Elizabeth thought.

“Thank you,” Charlotte whispered as they climbed the stairs to the second floor. “I was tired, but could not bring myself to say anything. You are truly a blessing.”

“I could not bear to listen to his sermon any longer,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

Charlotte chuckled weakly and leaned on Elizabeth’s arm. “This child is wearing me thin,” she confessed. “I have never felt so exhausted in all my life.”

Elizabeth squeezed Charlotte’s arm gently. “And it shall only increase after the child’s arrival.”

Charlotte grimaced. “That is not reassuring in the slightest.”

“I am very well aware.”

“I may beg you to stay and act as the child’s nurse,” Charlotte teased her.

“Oh, I would not wish my influence on any child,” Elizabeth said. “I am very well versed in games and stories, but you should not like them to learn from my accomplishments. My drawing is limited to flowers, I play the pianoforte very ill, and I would be a terrible model of female deportment. I could teach them to read easily enough, but I do not know how much of such a pursuit would be acceptable for the children of a parson.”

Charlotte laughed gently and shook her head. “You are entirely too dismissive of your virtues, Lizzy. I would be very pleased, indeed, if my daughter were to be like you.”

Elizabeth made an unladylike noise and led Charlotte down the corridor toward her bedchamber. Mr. Collins had moved into a separate bedroom to give Charlotte space during her pregnancy, and Elizabeth was pleased to see that such care had been taken. When she mentioned such a thing, Charlotte laughed.

“It was on Lady Catherine’s advice, of course,” she said. “I had mentioned it over breakfast one morning, but he had been very opposed to the idea. Until her Ladyship commented on that very

subject... And suddenly he was quite amenable to it.”

Elizabeth laughed ruefully and helped Charlotte to sit down upon the edge of the bed.

“I am surprised by very little these days,” she said. “And this is as unsurprising a development as any.”

“Indeed,” Charlotte sighed.

“The kitchen maid is gone for the evening, might I bring you some washing water?” Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte shook her head and waved away Elizabeth’s concerned expression. “No. No, the girl will be back in the morning. I would like to sleep, I think.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

She was concerned about Charlotte, but there was nothing she could do at that moment except for making certain that her friend was comfortable.

Once Charlotte was settled, Elizabeth set the candle on Charlotte’s bedside should she want to read, and left the room as quietly as possible. She crept down the corridor toward the bedchamber she had been given and sank gratefully onto the edge of the bed. The mattress was soft and she realized just how exhausted she was.

It was not late, but Elizabeth was happy enough to prepare for bed. The following day would bring its own challenges. Chiefest among them being Lady Catherine de Bourgh, herself.

Elizabeth had replayed every conversation she had had with the older woman in her head several times since their last meeting, and she had resolved to do her best to keep a civil tongue. Lady Catherine *was* full of condescension—but certainly not in the manner that Mr. Collins so enjoyed. Disdain was a more appropriate term for her Ladyship’s manners, and Elizabeth had not appreciated her tone of voice then, and she would not appreciate it now, either.

But, if it were a matter of making certain that Charlotte was well taken care of, she would bear it for as long as was necessary.

As she stoked the small fire in the hearth and climbed beneath the coverlet, Elizabeth also found herself wondering at Anne de Bourgh's condition. The last time Elizabeth had seen the young woman, she had been quiet and thin—but not sickly. It was alarming to hear that she had been so affected, and that no one her mother had employed could determine the cause of her illness, or how best to treat it.

It was something she would have to ponder when she was able to see Anne de Bourgh for herself. If that were even possible. She liked to think that she was a useful sort of person, and if she could be of any assistance she would try... even if the efforts would not be appreciated, it was necessary.

Elizabeth awoke before dawn, she was always unsettled

sleeping in strange beds, but it was mostly because of the cold that she was driven from beneath the blankets with chattering teeth and chills that ran up and down her spine.

She re-laid the fire in the hearth and tried her best to light it, but her fingers were cold and useless. She shrugged into a robe and tugged woolen stockings over her cold legs before pulling back the curtains. The morning was unreasonably bright and she winced at the glare of the early sunshine off a fall of fresh snow. She smiled briefly at the sight of it, and then noticed a set of footprints that had been set into the white expanse already... *Mr. Collins could not already have departed the parsonage for the day?* She pulled her robe tightly around her shoulders and ventured out into the corridor.

The house was quiet, and Elizabeth was determined to bring Charlotte tea and warm washing water before seeing to her own comforts.

She bustled down the stairs, moving quickly to keep warmth in her limbs as she went. The door to Mr. Collins' study was closed and Elizabeth breathed a small sigh of relief that she would not have to speak to the man.

It was far too early to bear his particular style of conversation.

She walked through the parsonage to the kitchen and added more logs to the fire that was still burning in the hearth. She broke the thin skin of ice on the water bucket and filled the kettle before

setting it over the fire to boil.

Charlotte deserved so much more than this, Elizabeth thought as she looked around the small kitchen. She had grown up in Lucas Lodge with large kitchens and a small collection of servants that saw to most of their needs. Much like her own family, the Lucas' lived well enough for their position in society, and the parsonage was a marked change that would have been difficult to become accustomed to.

Elizabeth did not know how she, herself, would have fared in a similar situation. It would be one thing to learn to run a household such as this one, but to manage Mr. Collins in addition to such changes would have been another challenge altogether.

She gathered up a jug for hot water and a small tray for tea. She placed the teapot, a cup, sugar and a small pot of milk upon the tray and hoped that she would be able to balance both the tray and a jug of hot water herself.

The bell upon the kitchen wall tinkled gently and Elizabeth suppressed a small laugh. She would be playing the part of kitchen maid today. She curtsied at the bell and laughed to herself as she poured hot water into the teapot and filled a jug with the remainder. With the tray balanced carefully and the handle of the jug held tightly in her free hand, Elizabeth walked out of the kitchen as slowly as she could to keep from spilling the tea or sloshing the hot water from the jug over her legs.

It was slow progress, but she was able to climb the stairs with little difficulty and felt quite accomplished as she stood in front of Charlotte's door.

"Alice, is that you?" Charlotte called out. "The door is open."

Elizabeth pushed at the door with her elbow and smiled at Charlotte's gasp of surprise. "I have come as you commanded, Madam," Elizabeth said grandly as she set the tea tray down upon the vanity and placed the jug of hot water beside the wash stand.

"Lizzy! How—"

"Alice has not yet arrived," Elizabeth said warmly. "But I have

come bearing gifts to cheer you. Hot water for washing, and tea to fortify you for the day ahead.”

“How strange,” Charlotte mused, “Alice is often here at an early hour. I had expected—”

“Do not fret,” Elizabeth said. “I am certain that there was something at Rosings that delayed her coming. It snowed overnight, so I would not be surprised if she is late in her arrival.”

Charlotte frowned at the window and pushed the coverlet back. “It is frightfully cold,” she said.

“It certainly is,” Elizabeth agreed. She bent to stoke the fire in Charlotte’s hearth and went to the vanity to pour a cup of tea. Charlotte accepted the cup with a grateful smile.

“What would I do without you?” she asked.

“You would be cold and hungry, and in need of a bath,” Elizabeth laughed. “I am happy to be here to assist you, Charlotte. But I will leave you to your morning. Call for me if you need anything. Or ring the bell, I shall be down in the kitchen to find my own cup of tea and wash water next!”

Charlotte smiled and Elizabeth took her leave, closing the door behind her as she did so. The house was still cold, and she pulled her shawl tighter around her body and descended the stairs once more.

As she headed toward the kitchens, she heard the *crash* of a door closing, and felt a rush of cold air blow through the corridor. *Alice must have arrived.*

Elizabeth put a smile on her face and went into the kitchen prepared to greet the girl, but instead of a smiling young woman, she found the kitchen door open. Cold wind gusted through and snow blew over the stone floor.

“Oh!” Elizabeth gasped and lunged forward to close the door, but as soon as her hand fell upon the iron latch, the door was jerked out of her hand. Elizabeth caught herself on the doorframe before she fell, and came face to face with a young woman with a mop of wild straw-colored hair that was barely contained beneath

the white muslin cap she wore.

“Here, now,” the girl cried. “You gave me a fright!”

She carried a pail of water in one hand and a bundle of sticks was balanced under her arm.

“Alice?” Elizabeth spluttered.

“I am.”

“Goodness, I do apologize,” she moved out of the way to allow the young woman to enter the kitchen. Her cheeks were pink from the cold, but her eyes were red-rimmed as though she had been crying. Elizabeth was about to ask her if anything was the matter, but the girl set down the bucket and dropped the sticks to the stone floor with a *crash* that made Elizabeth thankful that Charlotte was already awake.

“Have you just come down from Rosings?”

“I have. Mrs. Allen couldn’t spare me any sooner.” The girl blinked at Elizabeth curiously. “And who—”

“Miss Bennet,” she replied quickly. “I am here to assist Mrs. Collins until the baby arrives.”

The girl nodded disinterestedly and went about her chores. She stoked up the fire and put another kettle of water over the fire to boil.

Elizabeth felt somewhat awkward standing there and she pulled her shawl around her shoulders self-consciously, aware that she was only in her nightdress and a pair of woollen stockings. “I should like some tea, and hot washing water,” she said briskly. “I am staying in the guest chambers on the second floor.”

“Of course, Miss,” the girl replied without looking at her.

Elizabeth felt as though there were something she wanted to ask the girl, but she could not remember what it might have been.

She left the kitchens and rushed through the house and up the stairs to her bedchamber. It was tempting to dive back into bed and hide under the warm coverlet, but she could not—she was expected at Rosings Park for tea, and while it might have been preferable to stay in bed, she could not avoid Lady Catherine de

Bourgh forever.

Elizabeth was pondering how best she would make her way to Rosings Park through the fresh snow when a carriage arrived at the parsonage gate.

“Lady Catherine has sent a carriage?” Elizabeth said wonderingly.

Charlotte came to Elizabeth’s side and peered through the curtains. “It would seem so,” she replied.

“Will you be all right if I leave you?” Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte frowned. “Contrary to my husband and her Ladyship’s insistence, I will not shatter into a thousand pieces if I venture out of the house. Yes. I shall be quite well. I have Alice for company, a fresh pot of tea, and the books you brought me from Meryton. I am very settled, indeed.”

Elizabeth smiled and kissed her friend’s cheek briefly. “Very well,” she said reluctantly. “Though I do feel somewhat at odds with the invitation. It seems wrong to go to Rosings without you.”

“You know Lady Catherine well enough,” Charlotte said. “You will know exactly how to pacify her if the need arises.”

“Indeed?” Elizabeth laughed.

“Better than I,” Charlotte replied with some chagrin.

“I do not envy Miss de Bourgh,” Elizabeth said. “I could not abide a dragon such as her for a mother...”

“It is a wonder that the poor girl did not accept the last offer of marriage that was made,” Charlotte mused.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Oh?”

It was not uncommon for a proposal to be refused, Elizabeth herself had refused Mr. Collins, but she was not a high-born young woman. “It must have been difficult for her,” she said.

Charlotte nodded. "Mr. Collins told me that her Ladyship was beside herself with anger."

"I find myself entirely unsurprised," Elizabeth murmured. She pulled her shawl from the back of the sofa and draped it around her shoulders. The carriage ride would not be long, but she did not relish being cold for too much time.

She kissed Charlotte's cheek quickly. "I shall be back in time for supper," she said. "If I remember correctly, Lady Catherine does not linger over her teatime with any sort of sentimentality."

"I am curious to know what she has to say," Charlotte said. Elizabeth made a face.

"I am certain that you are not," she said.

Charlotte laughed. "Let us say, instead, that I am interested in how much of what observations she has made and what opinions she had formed..."

"Entirely more interesting," Elizabeth said. "I shall be certain to relay any and all pertinent information to you as soon as possible, Mrs. Collins."

She could not keep her expression neutral during this exchange, and dissolved into laughter before she could finish what she wanted to say.

"See that you do," Charlotte sniffed dramatically. "I shall await your return in the parlor, where I shall sit with much anticipation while you are out of my sight."

"You poor thing," Elizabeth said fondly. "Poor Charlotte with only a kitchen maid for company."

"Alas, this is my destiny," Charlotte sighed.

Elizabeth laughed softly and pulled her gloves up over her elbows. She would be grateful for their warmth very soon, of that she had no doubt.

The morning was cold, though the sun peeped through the grey

clouds with some determination, its rays would not be enough to melt any of the snow that had fallen. If she were at Longbourn, Elizabeth would have welcomed an unexpected fall of snow, but she was not at Longbourn, and the snow at Hunsford made her feel isolated and small.

The carriage driver's face was red with the cold as he opened the door for her. Elizabeth thanked him and settled into her seat. She waved to Charlotte and then sat back as the carriage lurched into motion.

As she suspected, it was a very short ride up to Rosings Park, but long enough that Elizabeth could think back on her previous interactions with her Ladyship and remembered her previous dislike of the woman—and of Lady Catherine's very particular dislike of her.

In doing so, Elizabeth became more confused as to the nature of the teatime invitation. There was no real reason for it... They were not friends, and she had no connection to Anne de Bourgh.

The only reason for it would be an intervention so that Lady Catherine could be certain that her rules, suggestions, and admonishments for Charlotte's pregnancy were being obeyed.

It was obvious that her "suggestions" were nothing of the sort, and where Elizabeth would have lost her patience some time ago, Charlotte seemed to be adept at dodging the older woman's attempts to control her through such means.

Elizabeth watched the scenery through the carriage window. Mr. Collins had been correct—Rosings Park was, indeed, pleasingly situated upon the hill. But Elizabeth could see as she stepped out of the carriage that the view which had been the foremost part of the boast was only truly impressive during the winter. In the springtime, the lovely aspect of the river and the village some miles away would be obscured by poplar and birch trees which flanked the house and grounds.

The house itself was as Elizabeth remembered it, and as she looked up at the snow covered roof and the high windows she was

reminded again of how the house seemed to impose itself upon the landscape. A more graceful building would have been better suited to the landscape, but Elizabeth held no illusions that the de Bourgh family was not given to such things. An unnecessary sentimentality, no doubt.

She was welcomed by the same stiff-backed butler she remembered from her last visit to the estate, and was led down the corridor toward her Ladyship's parlor. The corridor was cold, colder than Elizabeth had expected, and she was grateful once more for her shawl. She walked quickly to keep pace with the butler and was relieved when he opened the door and held it open for her to walk past him.

"Ah, Miss Bennet," Lady Catherine exclaimed loudly. "I was wondering when you might arrive. I do not like to be kept waiting. Mr. Collins surely expressed such a thing when you were informed of your invitation?"

"Of course," Elizabeth said. She glanced at the clock upon the fireplace mantle and noted that she was, indeed, not late in the slightest, but correcting her Ladyship would have been a mistake of the highest order and she decided to keep her own counsel.

"Well, come and sit," Lady Catherine said with some exasperation. Elizabeth did as she was told and took a seat across from the older woman. Lady Catherine, herself, was grandly dressed and seated as close to the fire that roared in the great fireplace as possible. Elizabeth could feel the heat of it on her face and arms, and she did her best not to let her delight in the warmth to be too obvious.

"Will Miss de Bough be joining us," Elizabeth asked as a maid appeared and began the process of pouring the tea and setting pastries onto small plates.

She felt somewhat awkward watching the maid go about her duties. Elizabeth was not accustomed to such things. At Longbourn even Mrs. Bennet poured her own tea without complaint.

"No, she will not," Lady Catherine sniffed. "Anne has decided to

take ill this morning, and will not be coming to tea. And I suspect that I will not see her at luncheon, either.”

Elizabeth was somewhat taken aback by her Ladyship’s response to her daughter’s illness. “I am sorry to hear of her illness,” Elizabeth said sympathetically. “Has she seen a doctor?”

She could not be bold enough to allow Lady Catherine to know that she had already asked after Miss de Bourgh’s condition, but her Ladyship seemed not to be as concerned as one should be if such a mysterious malady had befallen their only child.

Lady Catherine laughed shortly. “Doctors. Apothecaries. Some madwoman from Paris carrying a carpet bag that smelled of dead cats... she has seen them all, and not one of them could tell me what my daughter is suffering from. Wilful girl. It would not surprise me in the least if she were pretending it all...”

Elizabeth recalled how Lydia had driven the whole of Longbourn mad with worry over a similar joke. She had pretended to be deathly ill for days, and was unresponsive to every doctor and treatment that was shoved under her nose. It was not until she could hold in her laughter any longer that the whole pantomime was given away. But Lydia was a foolish girl, and her jokes seemed to lean more to the spiteful than humorous—Anne de Bourgh, from what Elizabeth remembered of her, did not seem like the sort of young woman who would undertake such a folly.

“Do you really believe so?” Elizabeth asked.

“I do,” Lady Catherine said firmly. “You have a great many questions, Miss Bennet.” Her Ladyship’s voice was sharp and Elizabeth was worried that she had overstepped her bounds. “Do you know why you have been invited to Rosings Park today?”

Elizabeth looked down at her teacup. “I— No, your Ladyship, I confess that I do not.”

Lady Catherine huffed and sipped her tea. “I told Mr. Collins the reason very specifically. It is a wonder to me that he did not tell you.”

Elizabeth thought back to Mr. Collins’ extended description of

his day from the evening before, and realized that she had not been listening to a word he had said.

She shifted in her chair, but Lady Catherine did not seem to notice her discomfort.

“No matter. You are here, Miss Bennet, because Mr. Collins has told me that you will be Mrs. Collins’ companion during the remainder of her pregnancy.”

Elizabeth breathed a small sigh of relief. “Indeed, that is why I am here.”

“And have any of your sisters given birth recently?” she asked pointedly.

Elizabeth set down her teacup and met Lady Catherine’s steely gaze. “No, indeed not.”

“I see. I am surprised, then, that you have been called upon at such a time.”

“Charlotte merely wanted a familiar face at her bedside,” Elizabeth said. “Lady Lucas was not able to come, and Mariah is too young to be of much use.”

“Mrs. Collins tells me that her sister is the same age as your own sisters,” Lady Catherine said after a moment.

“Indeed, she is. She has only just celebrated her eighteenth birthday. She is the same age as my sister, Mary.”

“And I believe one of your younger sisters is married?”

Elizabeth gritted her teeth briefly. “You are quite correct,” she replied. “Lydia, the youngest, was married last autumn.”

“A shame to have the youngest sisters out in society and married before the elder. It simply would not do in London.”

“A benefit of being outside London, then,” Elizabeth said.

“So it would seem.”

They sat in silence for several moments while Lady Catherine beckoned to the silent maid to refill her teacup and helped herself to a small pastry.

“Miss Bennet, you would do well to listen to what I have to tell you,” her Ladyship began. Elizabeth smiled stiffly and tried not to

focus on the crumbs that fell upon Lady Catherine's bosom as she ate the pastry.

"I have engaged the services of Dr. Gannet, he has come all the way from Burgundy to attend Mrs. Collins. He has been present for several births in the houses of many of my dear friends in London."

"Very kind, of course," Elizabeth said.

"I worry that Mrs. Collins has a rather... provincial view of her particular condition."

Elizabeth blinked in surprise and she struggled to keep her expression neutral. "How so?"

"She will insist upon being permitted to undertake all *sorts* of activities that are unbecoming of a woman in her position. She has spoken often of her desire to work in the gardens at the parsonage and to help with the livestock!" Lady Catherine snorted in disbelief. "Can you imagine such a thing!"

Indeed, Elizabeth could imagine such a thing. Charlotte was an unfailingly independent sort of woman, and she would have been more surprised to learn of her friend deciding to spend her pregnancy abed or indoors. That was not in Charlotte's character.

But instead of saying that very thing, Elizabeth merely nodded and sipped her tea.

"Dr. Gannet will, no doubt, upon his next visit impress upon her that she is to respect his wishes, and mine, in this matter. And you would do well to confirm such things. I will not be undermined in this."

Elizabeth's spine prickled with sudden anger. Lady Catherine could not presume to order Charlotte about as though she were a servant. But she seemed to be doing precisely that without any thought for Charlotte's well-being or state of mind. She knew that her friend would want to keep busy, and perhaps keep her mind off the impending fear of birth... But Lady Catherine would not be interested in any such nonsense.

This was a woman who was accustomed to being obeyed by all who entered her orbit, and even if Elizabeth did step forward to

defend her friend, it would not matter. She would be banished from the house and grounds, and likely the parsonage, and her Ladyship's behavior would continue unabated.

Elizabeth set down her teacup and folded her hands in her lap.

"I see."

"Indeed, I am glad of it," Lady Catherine said sharply. "I am relieved to hear that I can count upon your support."

It was clear enough to Elizabeth that Lady Catherine was neither relieved nor supportive, but expected to have her wishes followed in all things.

During the remainder of their teatime engagement, Lady Catherine spoke at length about her own experiences with childbirth and child rearing, with more of an emphasis on the importance of hiring the correct staff to undertake and oversee such things so as to keep the inconvenience of *actually* having the child to a minimum. Elizabeth's pity for Anne de Bourgh flared stronger as her mother spoke. It was obvious that Lady Catherine was exhausted with the need to find her daughter a suitable husband, and that Anne's illness occupied a good portion of her Ladyship's thoughts. Though her interest seemed not to be based upon her concern for her daughter's health and well-being, but on her stubborn unwillingness to become well again and attend to the duties that were attached to the de Bourgh name.

"I am certain that Miss de Bourgh is as distressed by her illness as yourself," Elizabeth said helpfully.

"She is entirely too headstrong," Lady Catherine huffed. She set down her teacup and rose from her chair. Elizabeth struggled to her feet and put her own teacup down upon the small table beside her chair. "Hannah will see you to the door," she said briskly.

Elizabeth curtsied clumsily and glanced at the maid, who nodded. Elizabeth murmured her goodbyes as Lady Catherine

swept from the room and disappeared into the corridor.

“If you will follow me,” the maid said. She walked across the room without looking at Elizabeth, who scrambled to keep pace with the young woman.

“Have you worked at Rosings Park very long?” Elizabeth asked. Her curiosity about the house, and by extension the people who lived in it, had reached a peak and Elizabeth was determined to know more than the version of life in the house that Mr. Collins talked of at length on a daily basis.

“A few months, Miss.” The maid seemed hesitant to answer her question, which only fuelled Elizabeth’s curiosity all the more.

“And how many maids are there in service here?”

“I couldn’t say, Miss,” came the tight response. She opened the large door that led out to the courtyard and Elizabeth tugged her shawl about her shoulders hastily as the cold afternoon wind sliced into the foyer and whipped little drifts of snow upon the carpet.

The carriage waited in the snow-covered courtyard and she could see the driver as she straightened his posture and shifted in his seat. “Do you see Miss de Bourgh often?” Elizabeth asked.

“No, Miss,” the maid replied.

“I see.”

“Good afternoon, Miss,” the maid said sharply. It was a dismissal, and Elizabeth nodded and stepped out into the muted brightness of the afternoon. She stepped up into the carriage and pulled the door closed behind her. The maid’s mouth was a thin line, and her cold blue eyes seemed even colder as she pushed Rosings Park’s great wooden door shut.

Elizabeth shivered and sat back against the seat.

Perhaps she would ask more questions of the kitchen maid who came to the parsonage in the mornings. It seemed very strange to Elizabeth that Lady Catherine should be so angered by her daughter’s illness. If it were fatal, Lady Catherine would be left without an heir—and Rosings Park would pass to another relative... A thought that, no doubt, plagued her Ladyship on a

daily basis.

If Anne were well, an engagement could be secured—but if her illness persisted...

The carriage pulled up beside the parsonage gate and Elizabeth did her best to shake off the strange mood that had settled upon here. Perhaps Lady Catherine was upset about Anne's illness—people responded to stress and hardship in different ways. But it did not seem to be a natural way for a mother to react to her child's illness.

Elizabeth alighted from the carriage with a determination to speak to the kitchen maid, Alice. Perhaps she would know more about the house, and by extension, Anne de Bourgh. If she were ill after mealtimes, perhaps there was something else amiss...

Much of Elizabeth's time over the following weeks was taken up with becoming accustomed to the running of the parsonage. The kitchen maid that Lady Catherine permitted to come to work in the parsonage kitchens was cold and uncommunicative, but she did her job well and without complaint.

However, Elizabeth could not come to a decision as to how she would speak to the girl. Or what she might ask.

She had written to Jane to give her news of Charlotte's condition, but Elizabeth had also mentioned Anne de Bourgh's sickness, and her Ladyship's response to it—perhaps Jane would have some insight, or perhaps a suggestion of what to offer for assistance. If the doctors could not be relied upon to provide an accurate diagnosis, perhaps a 'country remedy' would be welcome.

Although Elizabeth doubted that Lady Catherine de Bourgh would ever consider such a thing, if it might help Anne toward recovery she might accept the assistance offered.

When Jane's letter did arrive, Elizabeth devoured its contents quickly. She skimmed over the details of the Regimental Ball that had occurred in her absence, and the preparations for the Christmas assembly. Both events were something that, while a large part of the Hertfordshire social calendar, she was glad to avoid.

My dear, Lizzy,

Your news of Anne de Bourgh's illness has been upon my mind for several days. Her symptoms are suspicious, as is her mother's reaction to her malady. Do you remember, in Meryton some years ago, a gentleman from a good family fell ill with similar symptoms. He was ill after mealtimes but seemed to improve during the day...

Elizabeth covered her mouth as she read those words and then read them again. She did remember the gentleman, very well, in fact. Mr. Knightsbridge had been an acquaintance of Mr. Bennet's, and her father had taken the news of his passing very hard. After the gentleman's death, his wife and daughter departed Meryton, never to return. It was later discovered that his wife and daughter had conspired to poison him, but they had disappeared from England and were not seen again...

Do you believe that such a thing might have befallen poor Miss de Bourgh? Could someone have conspired to make her ill?

Elizabeth shook her head in disbelief and Charlotte leaned toward her, her eyes alight with curiosity. Charlotte had always adored gossip—a trait she had inherited from her mother. “Lizzy, you must tell me what Jane has written,” she said in a hushed voice. “Your face is so pale, it must be a scandal... What has happened since I have been away?”

“I confess it is something that I had not been prepared to read,” Elizabeth said. “I had written to Jane to ask for her opinion on Miss de Bourgh's illness—and though I had a feeling that

something was amiss, Jane's own words have confirmed my suspicions."

Charlotte's eyes widened. "Suspensions?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Would you ever suspect that someone would want to hurt Anne de Bourgh?"

Charlotte laughed shortly. "Miss Anne? Oh, no. She has always been a pale, sickly creature. This is a passing malady, nothing more. Her Ladyship is convinced of it."

"That is true," Elizabeth said. "Lady Catherine confirmed the same for me only the other day over tea... But I cannot shake the feeling that it is something more. In Meryton, a gentleman took ill in much the same way... and it was discovered that he had been poisoned!"

"Poisoned!" Charlotte's surprised exclamation made Elizabeth flinch and Charlotte lowered her voice immediately. "Poisoned?" she whispered. "But who would want to do such a thing? Miss de Bourgh is entirely innocent, she would have no enemies."

"But her Ladyship might," Elizabeth mused.

Charlotte shook her head. "Surely not. Her Ladyship is patroness to many people in the village, and the parsonage enjoys her support... Certainly it could not be any of them."

Elizabeth read Jane's letter again, but she could not think of any other reason that Anne de Bourgh might be ill. If nothing had changed in the household routine, and the meals had not changed...

"Is her Ladyship prone to changing her menu very often?" Elizabeth asked. "Perhaps it is as simple as some canned fruit or vegetables that have been prepared incorrectly."

Charlotte frowned. "As you can well imagine, Lady Catherine is very careful about her diet, and she does not welcome change. Her menu changes to accommodate the season, but that is the extent of such things."

That fact did not surprise Elizabeth in the slightest.

"I think I must speak to Alice," she said.

“Whyever for?”

“She will know what her Ladyship demands for her meals, and what Anne has been eating... Or she might know of someone who does. I do not expect her to be helpful, but I should try.”

“You are welcome to,” Charlotte said. She looked at the clock that had been placed upon the parlor mantle over the roaring fire that took some of the chill off the room. “I believe she has departed for the day, but in the morning, perhaps.”

Elizabeth nodded. “In the morning. In the meantime, Jane has given me a recipe for a tea that will calm her stomach, perhaps it will ease some of the pain. If Miss de Bourgh is suffering from the same mysterious malady as Mr. Knightsbridge did until his death, she will be in pain and have need of some relief.”

“Of course, you are more than welcome to use the kitchens.”

Elizabeth rose from her chair and placed her hand atop Charlotte’s. “When I am finished I will bring you a fresh pot of tea,” she said with a smile.

Charlotte sighed and leaned back in her chair. Her belly had grown in the weeks that Elizabeth had been at Hunsford, and she seemed to be in more discomfort as the child became more active. She rubbed a hand over her stomach. “This child is far too eager to come out and see the world,” she said.

“Let us hope that she has a little more patience,” Elizabeth laughed. “We are not ready to welcome her just yet!”

Charlotte looked at her abandoned pile of knitting. “Indeed not. I fear that I shall never finish that blanket.”

“I shall help you with it,” Elizabeth said. “Though I confess that I can be of little more help than winding your yarn and hunting for stray threads, I shall assist you as best I can!”

Charlotte laughed. “Perhaps with doubled efforts we might be able to complete it before the New Year is upon us.”

“Let us hope!”

Elizabeth lifted the tea tray and walked toward the kitchens with a smile upon her face. But as she did so, her head swam with

possibilities. Jane's letter had awakened a new kind of suspicion inside her chest. Mr. Knightsbridge's death had come as a surprise, but the revelation that his death had been caused by poison had sent shock waves through the community. Surely, such a thing could not happen in so small a town as Meryton—and to so kind a gentleman...

What if the enemy behind Anne de Bourgh's illness was not a disgruntled parishioner, or an acquaintance in search of some kind of revenge...

She stepped into the kitchen, completely wrapped up in her thoughts, and let out a thin gasp of surprise as she almost tripped over Alice and almost dropped the tea tray in the process.

The girl was on her hands and knees on the stone floor, sweeping the remnants of a broken piece of crockery into a wooden.

"Oh! I did not see you there!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

The girl looked up at her with cold blue eyes and dropped a shard of pottery into the bucket.

"What happened?" Elizabeth asked.

"I was clumsy, Miss," was the simple reply.

"I did not expect to see you here," Elizabeth said. "Mrs. Collins was certain that you had gone."

The girl shook her head. "I wanted to set some things aside for tonight's supper."

"Very kind of you," Elizabeth said. She set the tea tray down upon the table and knelt on the cold stones to help the girl with the mess.

"How long have you worked at Rosings Park?" Elizabeth asked.

Alice looked at her cautiously. "I've been working for her Ladyship for six months," she replied after a moment.

"So short a time," Elizabeth said.

The girl shrugged. "Most of the other girls are new. Mr. Chester, the butler, and Mrs. Brandon have been in service the longest."

"I see," Elizabeth said. She put the last piece of broken crockery into the bucket while Alice wiped at the liquid that had splashed out of the jug when it had fallen. "And the cook? How long has she been working there?"

"Mrs. Allen?" Alice shook her head. "I couldn't say."

Elizabeth was aware that she was asking too many questions, and the girl's replies were becoming more and more guarded, but she had to press on.

"Do you know much about what Miss de Bourgh eats?" she asked boldly.

Alice paused in her wiping and looked at Elizabeth strangely. Her cold eyes burned into Elizabeth's and she fought the urge to look away.

"No."

"No? Does she eat the same food as her Ladyship? Or does she have specially prepared meals?"

"I couldn't say," Alice replied stiffly. "I only do as I'm told."

"Of course," Elizabeth said kindly. She opened the kitchen door and shivered as a cold wind buffeted her cheeks. She set the bucket down outside the door and then pushed it closed. She shivered and moved closer to the fire. The cast iron kettle was full of water, and she set it over the fire to boil.

"Would I be able to speak to Mrs. Allen?" she asked.

"Why?"

Elizabeth blinked at the sharpness of Alice's tone, but she pretended not to notice the hostility of the question. "I would like to speak to her, that is all. I am curious about a recipe for some of the pastries that were prepared for tea. I very much enjoyed them and would like to take them home to Hertfordshire for our own cook to prepare."

"I see," Alice said. She did not appear to be convinced by Elizabeth's lie, and she scolded herself for her stilted delivery.

"Will you tell her that I would like to see her?" she asked.

Alice did not reply. Instead, she stood up from her task and

went over to the counter and dunked her cloth into a bowl of water to rinse it. She wrung the cloth out and then pinned it to a piece of wire that had been strung along the stone wall near the fireplace for that specific purpose.

“If you’re excuse me, Miss,” Alice said shortly. “I’ll be expected back at Rosings Park to prepare for supper. I’ve left you some cold ham and vegetables for your own meal.”

“Thank you, Alice,” Elizabeth said.

“I’ll come back in the morning for tea and breakfast,” she said as she swept a woollen shawl over her shoulders. She brushed some of her pale hair out of her eyes and marched for the kitchen door. The kettle began to boil and Elizabeth turned her attention to taking it off the fire. The sound of the wooden door slamming shut made her jump and she watched Alice trudge away from the house through the snow in the herb and vegetable gardens that hugged the side of the parsonage.

“Very curious, indeed,” she murmured.

She prepared tea for Charlotte and then set to arranging the herbs and items she would need to make a calming tea for Anne de Bourgh. She would have to speak to Mrs. Allen—perhaps the cook would be able to shed some light upon what was happening at Rosings Park.

“I wish that Dr. Gannet was not coming today,” Charlotte

grumbled as Elizabeth helped her into her sleeping robe.

“It cannot be helped,” Elizabeth said soothingly. “You know Lady Catherine would scold you until she was red in the face if you did not allow the doctor to see you.”

Charlotte sighed. “I know. I have just been exhausted this week.”

“It will pass soon enough, and you will be exhausted for different reasons very soon.”

Charlotte grimaced. “That is not comforting.”

“I am sorry to tell you the truth,” Elizabeth laughed. “But you would be cross with me if I told you lies about how many hours your child will sleep each night, and how calm and placid they will be...”

“This is very true.”

“Charlotte?” Mr. Collins’ voice rang out from the foyer and Elizabeth took a deep breath to steady herself for his arrival. “Charlotte, my dear, Dr. Gannet has come all the way from London to see you!”

“Does he believe that I have forgotten?” Charlotte muttered.

Elizabeth smiled and helped her friend to climb into her bed. “I shall go and greet the doctor,” she said. “You stay comfortable.”

“Easier said than done, I am afraid.”

Elizabeth stepped out into the corridor as Mr. Collins came up

the stairs. He was speaking quite loudly to the gentleman behind him—explaining how her Ladyship had been instrumental in the design of the parsonage and how her advice had been carefully heeded in the design and shape of the gardens.

Dr. Gannet was younger than Elizabeth had expected him to be. He was a tall, lean figure of a man with a black beard shot through with silver. His hair was thinning, but still dark and Elizabeth liked the warmth of his eyes.

“Ah, Cousin,” Mr. Collins said briskly. “Dr. Gannet, this is my cousin Miss Elizabeth Bennet, she has come to stay with my dear Charlotte to assist with anything she might need before the child is born.”

Elizabeth bobbed a quick curtsy and smiled at the doctor. “Charlotte is very eager to see you, Sir,” she said.

“I am certain that she is not,” Dr. Gannet said with a chuckle. “Very few of the young ladies in my care are in a forgiving state of mind at this stage of their pregnancy.”

Elizabeth hid her smile behind her hand and opened the bedchamber door for the doctor to enter.

“Dr. Gannet has been very highly recommended by her Ladyship,” Mr. Collins began, but Elizabeth was not interested in what he had to say, and from the way the parson edged away from the door, he was not eager to see what might occur in the room where his wife lay.

“Perhaps you might ask Alice for some tea?” Elizabeth said.

“Ah, yes. Of course,” Mr. Collins said quickly. He was obviously grateful for the opportunity to escape the situation, and Elizabeth shook her head as he fled down the stairs and headed toward the kitchens.

Elizabeth leaned against the doorframe and listened to the accoucheur’s soothing voice as he asked questions about how Charlotte was feeling, her appetite, and the movement of the child. From what she could hear, everything was progressing normally, and Dr. Gannet seemed pleased with the results of his examination.

Elizabeth smiled as the door opened and she met the doctor's warm gaze. "Miss Bennet," he said. "Mrs. Collins is very lucky to have a friend at her side at this time."

"Indeed, I could not refuse her request," she said. "Mr. Collins has gone downstairs to be certain that there will be tea for you in the parlor."

"Wonderful," he said. "I should not like to return to London on an empty stomach."

"Indeed not."

The doctor nodded to her and walked toward the stairs, and Elizabeth gnawed on her lip as she tried to decide what to do.

"Dr. Gannet," she said quickly.

At the head of the stairs, the gentleman turned.

"I was wondering if you might give me your opinion on a... sensitive matter."

"Sensitive?"

Elizabeth took a deep breath. "Yes... It is not for myself. You see, I have a friend at home in Hertfordshire who is experiencing some trouble, and I had hoped that you might be able to give me some insight into their malady."

The doctor laid a hand upon the banister and looked at her with interest. "What sort of malady?"

"The young woman in question, she is experiencing... that is to say she is in the grip of a mysterious affliction for which there has been no clear reason for its occurrence. She is well in the morning before tea, and then at mealtimes becomes suddenly very ill—she is unable to attend parties and dances, and spends much of her time in bed."

"After mealtimes," he said thoughtfully. "And nothing in her diet has changed?"

"Not that I am aware," Elizabeth replied.

The doctor shook his head. "Until you can be certain that it is not the food, I would look to the water... Perhaps there is something amiss with the well. An animal might have fallen in and

polluted the water. Does she have a fever? Stomach pain?"

"I am not certain," Elizabeth admitted.

The doctor tapped his fingers upon the banister. "I would discover as much as I could about the young woman's daily life and then look carefully at each aspect. If there has been any change, it could be the culprit."

"Could there be any other reason for it?" Elizabeth asked.

"Well, of course. Hysteria, stress... I have heard of many a young woman who has been too ill to be married to a young man that they did not favor..."

Elizabeth bit her tongue to keep from saying something sharp. Anne de Bourgh was *not* feigning her illness.

"It would be easy enough to give the impression of illness without showing all the symptoms of a true malady," he said. "It would explain why there have been other doctors who are unable to find the reason for her symptoms. Symptoms with no cause are very difficult to diagnose."

"Thank you, Dr. Gannet, I will advise my friend of your thoughts," Elizabeth said. She forced herself to smile, though her stomach was tight and her hands felt cold. "Mr. Collins will be waiting for you in the parlor."

The doctor nodded his thanks and descended the stairs and Elizabeth turned back to Charlotte's bedchamber.

"How are you feeling?" she asked as she came into the room.

"He could have warmed his hands before touching my stomach," Charlotte grumped. "There is nothing amiss, the child is healthy and strong, and I am only exhausted because it is normal for a woman in my condition to be so."

"You do not sound pleased," Elizabeth said with a smile. Charlotte was usually a very practical young woman, not given to outbursts of emotion, but pregnancy had changed her, and Elizabeth was certain that it was for the better.

Charlotte sighed. "I am pleased. However, he also recommended that I spend more time in bed so as to encourage the

child's growth. And more red meat for supper."

"I will be certain to let Alice know," Elizabeth said. "I am certain that Lady Catherine will be more than happy to assist in making certain that you are following the doctor's orders."

"To the letter," Charlotte said with a grimace.

"Come now, you have good news about the child, and all seems very well, indeed."

"It does." Charlotte's cheeks were pink, and she looked happy which made Elizabeth feel somewhat relieved.

"I will go down to the kitchens and tell Alice that you will require red meat for your supper."

Charlotte's smile was full of gratitude. "What would I do without you, Lizzy? Mr. Collins removed himself from the situation as soon as he was able did he not?"

Elizabeth leaned against the doorframe and nodded briefly. "He did."

Charlotte sighed.

"Not every gentleman is in possession of a stoic disposition for such things," she said reassuringly. "He will be very pleased to hear that his wife and child are in good health, of that I am certain."

"As you say," Charlotte said.

"Rest now," Elizabeth said. "I will see to supper."

Charlotte settled herself back on her pillows and closed her eyes, and Elizabeth closed the bedchamber door as quietly as she could.

As she descended the stairs into the main floor of the parsonage, she could hear Mr. Collins and Dr. Gannet talking together in the parlor. Elizabeth did not want to speak to either of them at that moment, and she walked past the door as quickly as possible to avoid being seen.

She had a sudden thought and stopped in the drawing room to take paper and a quill from Charlotte's writing box to write a note for Miss de Bourgh. Dr. Gannet's diagnosis and thoughts on her

malady had only brought more questions into Elizabeth's mind. But it was Jane's reminder of Mr. Knightsbridge's untimely death that stood out more strongly. She needed to speak to Anne and discover the truth for herself.

Elizabeth folded and sealed the note, and tucked it into her pocket before she stepped out into the corridor and resumed her mission.

Alice was bent over the fire as Elizabeth entered the kitchens and she cleared her throat to alert the girl to her presence.

"Yes, Miss?"

"Dr. Gannet has left instruction that Mrs. Collins is to receive more red meat in her diet," she said. "I am certain that her Ladyship will not object. Will you tell Mrs. Allen?"

The girl nodded. "Of course."

Elizabeth pulled the note from her pocket. "I have another task for you..."

Alice's eyebrow rose slightly.

"Will you take this note to Miss de Bourgh?"

Alice shook her head. "I'm not allowed to do that—"

"Would you give it to Mrs. Brandon?"

"I could."

"Promise me..."

"I can't promise," Alice said. "But I will try."

Elizabeth handed over the note and sighed heavily. "That must be good enough. I wish to come and see her and bring her some tea that might ease some of her stomach pain."

Alice nodded, but Elizabeth could see that she was not interested in entering a conversation on the subject again.

"Thank you, Alice, I appreciate your assistance."

The girl turned back to the fire and murmured something in response that Elizabeth could not hear. It did not matter, she would be going to Rosings Park regardless of whether or not the note was delivered. However, it would be more of a trial to walk through the snow, and she hoped that Alice would do as she had

asked. But Elizabeth was determined, and if she had to walk in the cold, she would do it.

Though a carriage would have been preferable.

Elizabeth rose early the following morning and crept downstairs as she did every morning to see to Charlotte's tea and washing water. Alice seemed to be coming to the parsonage later and later in the mornings, but Elizabeth had mentioned nothing to Charlotte about it. She had enough to worry about at the moment and Elizabeth did not want to add more troubles to her shoulders.

Mr. Collins' study door was closed, but there were no footprints in the snow outside the parsonage, which could only mean that he had spent the night in his study. Elizabeth's own father was prone to such things, and while Charlotte might have taken such a thing personally, Elizabeth knew that it was something that she would have to become accustomed to.

Mr. Collins seemed to be more devoted to his patroness and his congregation than he ever would be to his wife, but Elizabeth hoped that would change when the child arrived.

She worked quickly to prepare Charlotte's tea and then turned her attention to the mixture she had made for Anne de Bourgh. It had been set aside in a small crockery bowl and she retrieved it from its hiding place amongst the herbs and set it down upon the wooden table in the center of the room. She inhaled the fragrances of basil, peppermint, and chamomile and added some dried rose petals before mixing it with a carved wooden spoon. Satisfied, she tipped the contents of the bowl into a small linen bag that she had stitched especially for this purpose.

Elizabeth tucked the bag into her pocket and set Charlotte's tea pot and cup onto the tray before filling an earthenware jug with

hot washing water.

Once Charlotte was settled, she would venture out to Rosings Park to call upon Miss Anne de Bourgh, whether she was expected or not.

Charlotte was still abed when Elizabeth knocked gently on the door, and she stirred only faintly when Elizabeth entered the room and set down the tea on the vanity and the water upon the wash stand.

“Do not get up, Charlotte,” Elizabeth said softly. “It is still far too early.”

“Has Mr. Collins left already?” she murmured.

“I do not think so. I did not see his determined footprints in the snow.”

“I am not certain that he returned from Rosings last night,” Charlotte sighed. “Perhaps he decided to stay.”

Elizabeth was surprised. “Does that happen often?”

“Mmm,” Charlotte replied in the affirmative. “Her Ladyship is often given to talking long into the night of her plans for the parsonage and the contents of my husband’s sermons. Which he is always eager to hear of.”

“I am sure,” Elizabeth said wryly.

“It has been a more common occurrence of late, but I can only assume that it is because of the approach of Christmas and the special services that have been planned.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said.

“I believe I shall stay in bed all day today,” Charlotte sighed. “This child is determined to kick me into submission.”

“Stay in bed,” Elizabeth said firmly. “I will be going to Rosings

this morning, but I shall not be gone long. You will have peace and quiet until my return.”

“Why are you going to Rosings?”

“To see Miss de Bourgh,” Elizabeth replied. “I have mixed her a herbal tea to soothe her stomach pain.”

“That is very sweet of you,” Charlotte yawned. “I am certain that your care will go unmarked by her Ladyship.”

“It is not for her, so she may ignore it all she likes,” Elizabeth said with a smile. She leaned down and kissed Charlotte’s forehead. “Go back to sleep.”

“I believe I shall,” Charlotte sighed.

Elizabeth left the room and closed the door behind her. She went to her bedchamber and dressed quickly, thankful that she had remembered to bring her thickest woollen stockings, but lamented the fact that she did not have a warmer cloak. She would have to ask her father for one for her birthday.

As she pulled her gloves up over her elbows, she heard the familiar sound of harness bells and looked out the window in surprise. A small black carriage, the same one that had come to collect her for tea at Rosings Park.

“She received my message,” she breathed.

It was wonderful to have the carriage, and Elizabeth raced down the stairs as quickly as she could. She checked to be certain that the bag of herbal tea was secured in her reticule and then opened the front door. The late morning sun gleamed off the fresh snow and Elizabeth waved to the driver who jumped down to open the carriage door for her.

Elizabeth skipped lightly through the snow, being careful to hold the hem of her gown up to prevent it from becoming wet and accepted the driver’s hand to help her step up into the carriage.

She settled back against the plush seat and let out a shuddering breath as she pulled a fur rug over her legs and shivered with cold. She had not expected that the winter would be quite so cold, but Hertfordshire was favored by a milder climate and she had not

been prepared for such a change in the weather.

When the carriage arrived at the door of Rosings Park, Elizabeth prepared to exit the carriage, but let out a small cry of dismay as the driver continued past.

The carriage continued around the side of the house, and Elizabeth could not put aside her confusion as to where they were going.

The carriage stopped in front of a small wooden door, and Elizabeth smiled as the door opened and Alice stepped out.

The driver jumped down from his seat and opened the door. He offered Elizabeth his hand and she took it gratefully as she stepped out and her shoes sank into the soft snow.

“Alice,” Elizabeth exclaimed, I am so pleased that you were able to deliver my note.”

The girl’s smile was quick and then she nodded to the driver and the carriage pulled away.

“Come with me, Miss,” the girl said.

Elizabeth was confused by her welcome, and that she was being brought into the house through a side door. As she came through the doorway, a blast of warm air hit Elizabeth directly in the face. *The kitchens*. She had never been into the kitchen of a house as large as Rosings Park. Longbourn’s kitchens were Mrs. Hill’s domain, but it was nothing to this.

Massive ovens baked bread and pastries, whole chickens and sides of meat turned on spits over roaring fires. Bowls of fresh fruit sat upon the long wooden table in the centre of the room, and jars of canned produce lined the shelves.

“Why are we here?” Elizabeth asked. She was aware of the stares of the other women in the kitchen, and she smiled nervously.

“Miss Anne didn’t want her mother to know that you were here,” Alice said.

A cold shudder rippled up Elizabeth’s spine. “I see.”

“This way, Miss. Mind the oven.”

Elizabeth ducked past the large bread oven as one of the cooks pulled open the door. The hot rush of air made her gasp, and she felt the heat of the oven envelop her whole body, starkly different to the biting cold of the outdoors.

Alice hurried through the kitchen and led Elizabeth down a long, narrow corridor flanked by several small rooms. Elizabeth peeked through one of the doorways and saw a narrow bed and a small table with a book and a candle set upon it, a maid's quarters, perhaps...

"Up the stairs, Miss," Alice said stiffly without looking behind her to be sure that Elizabeth was following. She rushed up the stairs almost soundlessly and Elizabeth struggled to keep up without making any noise. *How was it possible to move so quietly? Lydia could not go up and down a set of stairs without making everyone in the house aware of her movements...*

At the top of the stairs, Alice paused and Elizabeth watched as she looked both directions before beckoning for her to hurry. "Quickly now, Miss."

With a determined stride, Alice moved through the wide corridors of Rosings Park with Elizabeth following close behind her. The main house was far different from the labyrinthine structure of the lower quarters. It was also much colder. The wide corridors and large windows made the retention of any heat difficult, and Elizabeth was grateful for her cloak, and for her thick stockings.

Elizabeth felt uneasy at being in the house without Lady Catherine's knowledge. Her note had not meant to imply that a secret meeting would be necessary, but it was obvious that Anne de Bourgh did not agree.

She could hear muffled voices behind some of the closed doors they passed, but the sound was too indistinct to give any indication of who the speakers might be. Servants, perhaps. Or her Ladyship and a guest... Impossible to know. Elizabeth only hoped that Lady Catherine was otherwise occupied. The last thing she wanted was

to be discovered in the corridors of the great house without an invitation from the mistress of the house.

Alice's pace quickened as they turned another corner and Elizabeth forced herself to keep pace with the girl.

Elizabeth was distracted by a painting upon the wall, and she nearly collided with Alice when the girl stopped suddenly in front of a tall door. "Here, Miss," she said.

Elizabeth hesitated, waiting for Alice to open the door, but the girl merely nodded to her, and then turned on her heel and strode down the corridor.

"Wait," Elizabeth hissed.

"If Lady Catherine is not to know that I am here, how will I leave..."

"Miss Anne will ring," Alice replied simply, and then she turned away and continued down the corridor.

"Lovely," Elizabeth muttered.

She took a deep breath and knocked on the door hesitantly. There was nothing but silence from the room beyond. Elizabeth shifted uncomfortably and checked the corridor, but that wing of the house was silent and she was alone. She pressed her lips together and knocked again, slightly harder.

"Come in," came the faint reply. Elizabeth suppressed a groan of relief as she turned the shining brass knob and opened the door.

Elizabeth had not known what to expect, perhaps a bedchamber that was like any other one she had stayed in. But Anne de Bourgh's bedchamber was larger than the parlor at Longbourn, and she was hit immediately with the strangely sweet smell of sickness.

Anne de Bourgh was not pretending her illness.

A graceful desk piled with books, papers, and quills stood at the front of the room, and a couch covered with dusty rose velvet sat

beneath a window. The walls were lined with bookshelves, and a fire crackled in the fireplace. A massive bed, covered with a dark velvet canopy stood in one corner, but it was unoccupied.

“Who is it?” a thin voice asked.

“Miss de Bourgh,” Elizabeth explained softly. “It is Elizabeth Bennet. I sent you a note—”

She finally located the young woman, who was seated in a large chair in front of the fire. She was swathed in blankets and her face was pale and pinched in the soft winter sunlight that streamed through the sheer curtains that covered the chamber windows.

“Ah yes, Miss Bennet. I received your note. You were very kind to come and visit. I do not receive guests very often.”

Elizabeth smiled warmly and walked toward the fireplace. The room was cold, but it warmed considerably the closer she drew to Anne de Bourgh’s chair.

“How are you feeling today?” she asked.

“I am always better in the morning,” Anne said softly. “It is only after luncheon when I cannot bear the pain in my stomach—”

“I have brought you something to help ease some of the pain,” Elizabeth said. “It is nothing a doctor would give you, but a country remedy that has been helpful for me in the past.”

She drew the packet of tea from her pocket and handed it to Anne. She held the linen bag to her nose and inhaled delicately. After a moment’s pause, she smiled and Elizabeth felt some of the anxiety in her stomach begin to untwist.

“I have rung for tea. Perhaps we might have some together,” she said.

“I would like that very much,” Elizabeth said.

“I have had no appetite lately, which angers Mother to no end.” Anne sighed and gestured weakly at one of the other chairs.

Elizabeth removed her cloak and gloves and sank into the chair Anne had indicated with a grateful smile. “You are very kind to have sent the carriage this morning, I thank you.”

“I hope you will forgive the secrecy of your arrival,” Anne said

conspiratorially. "Mother does not like to welcome guests before luncheon."

Elizabeth wondered if that was the only reason, but what *would* Lady Catherine have done if she had discovered Elizabeth wandering the halls of Rosings Park uninvited?

"I see."

"My mother is a very particular woman," Anne continued. "She adopted my father's penchant for rules and strict adherence to schedule. It is a wonder that he did not join the military. It would have suited him very well, I think."

"Sometimes discipline is necessary to feel some kind of control over one's life," Elizabeth said softly.

"Perhaps. Though if you said that aloud in mother's presence, I believe you would be escorted from the room."

Anne smiled briefly, and Elizabeth wondered if Anne de Bourgh was making a joke or being serious. She decided that it was the former and smiled as well. She had not anticipated that this visit would be quite so uncomfortable, but she had been curious, and this was the price of curiosity.

"I have been worried about your health," Elizabeth blurted out. "Her Ladyship has only told me a very little—"

"Mother does not know much more than that," Anne said and Elizabeth could not ignore the hint of bitterness in her voice. "She sends doctors to see me, but they cannot discover the reason for my illness. Sometimes I am well for several days, and then ill again for longer... It is exhausting."

"I can only imagine."

"If it were not for the pain, I would not mind so much— I have been ill before."

"Has anything changed..." Elizabeth asked. "Have you eaten anything different to your mother or any other guests at the house?"

Anne shook her head. "Mother is very strict about meals. No substitutions or special requests. Everything served at the table is

eaten with no exceptions.”

“Has anything in the house changed at all?”

Anne sighed. “I would not know,” she said. “The servants change constantly, which does not surprise me. I am used to seeing unfamiliar faces in the corridors and carrying my tea trays.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said. It was surprising to her that such a large house would have such an incredible change in staff... many of the larger houses in Hertfordshire had staff who had been with the family for years. It was not uncommon for the children of servants to go into service themselves and continue to work in the same house as their parents.

There was a soft knock at the door and a maid bearing a tea tray entered the room. She curtsied briefly and bent to set the tray down, but Anne stopped her.

“Wait,” she said as she held out the linen bag that Elizabeth had brought. “I should like my tea made with this, please.”

The maid paused for a moment and then set down the tray and removed a plate of pastries and the cups, leaving only the teapot on the tray. “Of course, Miss,” she said. She took the linen bag and set it beside the teapot. “I’ll leave these here for you and come back in a moment. Won’t be long.”

“Thank you.”

The maid left the room with the rejected teapot and Anne sighed heavily. “You see? That one. I do not know her name. She seems pleasant enough. But I do not doubt that it will not be long before she, too, is replaced.”

“Why would she be replaced?”

Anne shrugged carelessly. “Who knows such things. Politics below stairs, I suppose. Mrs. Brandon is in charge of such things. I would not argue with her, either.”

Mrs. Brandon seemed to be a formidable woman, and Elizabeth hoped that she would not run afoul of her.

“Miss Bennet, I remember you from your last visit to Rosings Park,” Anne said suddenly. “Whyever have you returned?”

“Mrs. Collins is a dear friend,” Elizabeth said. “She requested that I come to Hunsford to keep her company until her child is born.”

“Ah, yes. Of course,” Anne said. “I had forgotten that she was pregnant.”

Elizabeth glanced at the tray of pastries that had been delivered. They smelled heavenly, and appeared to be filled with peaches and other summer fruit that had been preserved from the summer harvests. She desperately wanted one, but refrained as Anne did not seem to have any interest in them.

“You are from Hertfordshire—the countryside.”

“I am,” Elizabeth replied.

“I imagine that you must have quite a few balls and assemblies to attend. With dinners and dancing... Mother has been quite angry that I have not been able to attend any dinners or balls,” Anne said.

“There are quite a few,” Elizabeth said slowly. “There is a militia regiment garrisoned at Meryton, and the officers are quite fond of dancing.”

“That is the trouble with officers, is it not?” Anne said with a weak smile. “Too much dancing and talk, and nothing more.”

“I could not say.” Elizabeth was reminded of Mr. Wickham, and all of his fine talk. Despite her promise that she would try to see the good in him for Lydia’s sake, she still disliked him utterly for his betrayals.

“I have missed ever so many opportunities to meet eligible gentlemen,” Anne continued. “It is very difficult to arrange a marriage from a sickbed. Who would want a sickly wife?”

“Your health is more important than such things,” Elizabeth said reassuringly, but Anne made a face.

“My mother does not agree,” she said. “I am running out of time, Miss Bennet, surely that is such a thing you can sympathize with. Mrs. Collins was lucky to make her match with the parson. I do not believe that I shall be so lucky, though my father’s name

and my income should assure such a thing..." She sighed heavily.

Elizabeth wanted to say something reassuring, but it was difficult. She had been taken aback by Anne's mention that their window for arranging a suitable marriage was closing. Of course she could sympathize with such a thing, but it was not something that was spoken of with strangers. She could feel her cheeks warming with embarrassment and something like indignation, but she could not say anything. She wondered briefly how many proposals Anne de Bourgh had rejected in recent months, but then chided herself for her unkind thoughts. They were not in competition, after all, and it served no purpose to think of such things.

"Surely, you will be well soon," Elizabeth said.

"Mama seems to have given up hope of such a thing."

Another knock on the door interrupted them, and a different maid entered the room with a new teapot. The bag of herbs Elizabeth had prepared sat on the tray beside the pot and Elizabeth smiled as she inhaled the scent of the tea.

She reached for a pastry as the maid poured two cups of the steaming liquid, and was about to take a bite when the maid let out a small cry.

"What is it?" Anne asked sharply.

"The pastries, Miss," the maid choked out. "I am sorry, but they should not have been delivered here. They are... they are too old. I fear that they might be stale. I should not like to be scolded for giving you stale pastries."

Elizabeth reluctantly put the pastry down upon the plate once more and the maid snatched it off the table.

"Begging your pardon, Miss," the maid said hastily. "Please do not tell Mrs. Brandon."

Anne sighed heavily and waved the girl away. "It is no matter, I was not hungry."

"And you will not tell Mrs. Brandon?" The girl's question was desperate.

“No, I will not.”

“Thank you, Miss.” The maid fled the room and Elizabeth mourned the loss of the peach pastry she had been about to bite into. The slight sweetness of the sugar stung her lips and she picked up her cup of tea and inhaled deeply to distract herself from it.

“Now, you will be able to smell the rose petals, but the peppermint and chamomile will soothe your stomach,” she said.

Anne held out her hand and Elizabeth passed her the second teacup without hesitation. The young woman inhaled the scent of the tea, and Elizabeth could see some of the tension in Anne’s face recede.

“You are good to have brought this for me,” she said. “Thank you.”

“After learning of your malady I could not in good conscience sit idly by,” Elizabeth said. “I only hope that it gives you some comfort.”

“As do I.”

The clock on the mantle chimed and Anne frowned at it briefly. “You should not be here when luncheon is served,” she said. “Please ring the bell for Alice. She will take you to the carriage and return you to the parsonage.”

Elizabeth took a hasty sip of her tea and set it down upon the table before walking to the side of the room to pull the silken cord that Anne had indicated.

“So soon?”

“Mother will demand that I attend her for luncheon. I would not have Mrs. Brandon discover you here and ask questions that I do not wish to answer.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth said. She drank another gulp of tea and closed her eyes as it burned its way down her throat. “I can make you this tea any time you like,” Elizabeth said. “I can give it to Alice when she comes to the parsonage to make meals for us.”

“I would like that very much,” Anne said.

Elizabeth swept her cloak over her shoulders and pulled on her gloves as a sturdy knock sounded at the door.

"I hope I will be able to see you again soon," Elizabeth said.

"We shall see," Anne replied.

The door opened and Alice's severe face appeared in the doorway. "Come along, Miss, the carriage is waiting."

"Of course."

Elizabeth followed Alice down the corridor and back down the stairs toward the kitchens. This time the stares of the maids were harder to ignore, and she ducked her head as they passed through. As they passed the ovens, she thought she saw the intricately knotted shapes of the pastries that had been taken away from Anne's room burning in the flames, but she could not be certain.

She brushed her fingers over her lips at the memory of the sugar that had stung them, and then held her breath as they stepped out of the heat of the kitchen and into the crisp, cold air outside.

Elizabeth's breath fogged in the air in front of her as she thanked Alice for her help, but the girl was already walking away from her and disappeared through the kitchen door. She stood alone in the yard for a moment, wondering what she should do when the sound of horse's hooves echoed off the brick walls. She felt some sense of relief to see the carriage and the red-faced driver.

He jumped down to help her with the steps and Elizabeth settled back against the seat and pulled the fur over her knees once more.

She had left Rosings Park with more questions than answers, and now she had begun to wonder if Anne could have been afraid of her mother. What would cause a mother to treat her child so indifferently? Could Lady Catherine be the one behind Anne's illness? Surely, not. It seemed impossible. But the thought persisted. Mr. Knightsbridge had been murdered by the very family he held dearest—but what would Lady Catherine have to gain from

the death of her own daughter?

Several days passed without any word from Rosings Park, but

Elizabeth was preoccupied with Charlotte's needs. She was exhausted quite often, and her requests for meals had become stranger, but Charlotte seemed strong and determined, if uncomfortable with the changes that her body had been subjected to in the past weeks.

"This child will be as big as a piglet when it is born," she complained one morning. "I feel as though I can no longer safely navigate my own house without knocking something over."

"You are not as big as you might fear," Elizabeth laughed at her friend's good-natured frustration. "Dr. Gannet believes that your time is very close, and that there is nothing to fear. Especially when it comes to piglets."

Charlotte made a face and sipped her tea. "You have not told me everything of your visit to Rosings Park," she said.

"I have not quite decided what I should and should not say," Elizabeth said honestly. She had written to Jane for her sister's opinion of the situation, but her reply had been just as vague as Elizabeth's own thoughts. She had echoed Elizabeth's concern for the relationship between Lady Catherine and her daughter, but Elizabeth had no evidence aside from her own observations, which were hardly conclusive.

"Alice has been very strange these past few days has she not?" Charlotte said.

“Has she?”

“Indeed, I had considered mentioning something to Mr. Collins, but I do not want to have the poor girl scolded.”

Elizabeth frowned at her tea as she stirred it. She did not want to lose her only link to Anne de Bourgh and the secrets of Rosings Park, but Charlotte was correct. The girl arrived at the parsonage later and later each morning, and her responses to any questions or attempts to make conversation were short and unhelpful. The food she prepared was also lacklustre, but as it was winter there was not much that could be done about such things.

“Should I speak to her?” Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte smiled. “If you would not mind? I find that I never quite developed an appetite for scolding servants.”

“The kindest mistress in England,” Elizabeth said fondly.

“Or the meekest,” Charlotte laughed. “I should be hopeless with a house the size of Rosings.”

“As would I,” Elizabeth agreed. “I could not imagine such a thing. So many people working in the same house, and yet you would never know it.”

“A marvel, to be sure,” Charlotte said.

“I shall speak to her tomorrow morning,” Elizabeth said. “I am certain that she will just need to know that you are not cross with her, but that it is expected that she will come here and do her duties as instructed.”

Charlotte nodded. “You are a wonder, indeed.”

“I am your friend,” Elizabeth said. “It is my duty to see that you have no worries to plague your waking hours save for the child in your belly.”

“If only it were so simple,” Charlotte moaned. “My mind is full of worries related to that very thing, I fear I have no room for anything else.”

“I shall see to it,” Elizabeth said firmly. “You have my word.”

The following day, as promised, Elizabeth rose early and prepared Charlotte's tea and washing water as usual. She took her own tea in the parsonage kitchen, and waited for Alice's arrival. She had almost finished her second cup when the kitchen door opened and a cold wind blew through. Alice struggled through the door with several packages under her arms and a bucket of milk in one hand.

Elizabeth rushed forward to help her, and Alice jumped in surprise to see her in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry to be so late," she stammered. "Mrs. Allen needed my help..."

"It is no matter," Elizabeth said as she took the pail of milk and set it down on the stone floor beside the table. She immediately felt guilt rise up inside her as she watched the girl set down her packages and begin to unwrap them.

Alice was doing the work of two experienced women—which seemed very obviously to be beyond her capacity. Lady Catherine needed to give Charlotte permission to engage her own cook. Something that would have to be requested by Mr. Collins who seemed entirely unwilling to speak against his patroness or demand anything from her beyond what little she offered.

"Are you quite all right?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes," Alice replied shortly. "Mrs. Allen needed my help."

"As you said. Does she need your assistance every morning?"

"Sometimes."

Elizabeth recalled the business of the Rosings Park kitchens and found it difficult to believe that the cook would need Alice's assistance in any specific capacity. She would have had several other kitchen maids to choose from. Why Alice?

The girl turned suddenly and handed Elizabeth a small muslin wrapped package that was tied with a thin blue velvet ribbon.

"What is this?"

“From Miss Anne,” Alice said sharply.

“What is it?”

The girl shook her head and Elizabeth scolded herself inwardly for asking something so foolish. *Of course she would not know.*

“Mrs. Collins asked me to speak with you,” Elizabeth said. “You are expected to be at the parsonage by six, but I have not yet seen you arrive at such a time. If I need to speak to Mrs. Allen—”

The girl’s eyes widened. “No, please, Miss Elizabeth, don’t. I promise I will be on time.”

Her voice was desperate and Elizabeth felt another pang of guilt. She did not want the girl disciplined or scolded, either.

“See that you do,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “I shall not mention it, but I expect to see you here tomorrow morning at the proper time.”

“Thank you.”

The girl turned back to her work and Elizabeth left the kitchen with some anticipation to open the package that she had received.

She walked quickly down the corridor toward the parlor and paused at the door of Mr. Collins’ study. The parson was in the house, she was certain of that, and she pressed her ear to the door and tried to calm her breathing so that she could listen. But the room was silent.

Elizabeth frowned briefly and stepped away from the door. She had seen very little of her cousin since her arrival at Hunsford, and she could not be certain why he needed to be away for so much time. His services and preparations for Christmastide should not have taken up so many of his waking hours, and Elizabeth feared that Charlotte would have been quite alone if she had not agreed to come.

She continued down the corridor to the parlor and sank into one of the chairs by the cold fireplace to open her package. She untied the ribbon carefully and unfolded the muslin to reveal the empty linen herb bag, and a small folded letter.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet,

I thank you again for your kind visit, and must extend my regret that you could not stay longer. I should like to request another pouch of tea, for it has helped my stomach pain greatly. Please come again to Rosings Park, I will send a carriage for you this afternoon. If you cannot attend, please send a message back with Alice.

In your debt,

~ A dB

Elizabeth smiled and read the letter again. It was a simple letter, but one that she was pleased to receive. She had no reason not to return to Rosings Park, and re-folded the letter before returning to her bedchamber to prepare for the day ahead.

As promised, the carriage arrived just before luncheon, and though Elizabeth looked longingly at the meal that Alice had prepared for them, she did not tarry long. Jane had sent her some suggestions for a change in diet from Mrs. Gardiner's cook, and she clutched the papers tightly to her chest with a new packet of herbal tea that she had mixed while Alice had prepared Charlotte's meal. She grimaced as she waded through the snow that covered the pathway that led to the parsonage gate and resolved to ask the kitchen maid to sweep the front path of snow.

She was curious to see what Anne de Bourgh would be served for her own meal—she hoped that it would answer some of her questions, but she also did not doubt that it would only deepen the mystery that hung around the young woman's illness.

As she settled herself into the carriage, Elizabeth did her best to sort through her thoughts. She was usually very adept at solving puzzles, but this particular conundrum weighed upon her mind

and she felt utterly lost as to how to solve it.

Anne de Bourgh was very ill, that much was certain. What was not certain was the cause of it. The sickness would last for three or four days, and then fade away as though nothing had happened. But when it came on, it was with a violent swiftness and left her weak and pale. Mealtimes seemed to be the only unifying factor, but was it the food, or the drink, or something else entirely? She was well in the morning, but after luncheon she would be struck down with severe pain in her stomach...

Elizabeth could not shake the thought from her mind that there was something sinister at work—but could it be Lady Catherine de Bourgh who was the architect of it all? It seemed a ridiculous thought, but one that could not be discounted. No one had ever discovered the reason behind poor Mr. Knightsbridge's death, only speculation and gossip that had swirled through Meryton's social circles for years after the man's burial.

Some said that it was motivated by love—that his daughter, Doria Knightsbridge, had not been allowed to marry the unsuitable young man who had made a proposal. Or that his own wife had planned the murder to take advantage of a business opportunity that her husband had rejected.

Every family had secrets that they wished for no one to discover—and Elizabeth had very little doubt that the de Bourghs were any different.

But to poison one's own daughter? The thought was more than scandalous. It was horrifying. And what possible gain could there be to such an enterprise? It would leave Rosings Park without an heir—unless her Ladyship had always planned for another member of her extended family to inherit.

It was not uncommon for cousins to marry... but if none could be found to agree to such a match, what options would remain?

A marriage of convenience would not be such a terrible thing, Elizabeth mused. Charlotte had certainly undertaken such a practical arrangement in becoming Mrs. Collins. Elizabeth was not

certain that she would ever consider such an option for herself, but as the years passed, she might soften to such an idea.

As the carriage approached the side of the great house, Elizabeth prepared herself for it to pull around to the kitchen as it had on her previous visit. But this time the carriage stopped in front of the great double doors at the front of the house.

Elizabeth pulled the fur from her knees and prepared herself for the cold air that would assault her as soon as she alighted from the carriage. The driver opened the door and helped her down the steps. The snow had been swept away from the stone path and Elizabeth was grateful for it. She had grown entirely discouraged by having cold, wet toes in her shoes.

Winter was a wonderful season, if one were able to stay indoors for the majority of it.

The driver touched his hat briefly before he jumped back into his seat and the carriage pulled away. If the snow continued at its current pace, it would not be long before the carriages would be exchanged for sleighs. It had been several years since Elizabeth had taken a sleigh ride, and she found herself smiling at the thought of experiencing such a thing again.

The front door opened as she took the steps and she smiled at the stern-faced butler. "Good afternoon, Miss Bennet," he said. "Miss Anne is expecting you."

"Thank you, Mr. Chester."

She followed the unsmiling man through the corridor and was surprised again at how cold it was inside Rosings Park's walls. A fire crackled in every hearth that she could see, and she wondered at the cost and the impossibility of keeping such a building at a comfortable temperature. One or two rooms could be heated adequately with wood and coal, but a house of this size would have been an expensive challenge, indeed.

Elizabeth had expected to be taken to Anne's bedchamber once more, but this time she was led down a different corridor and Mr. Chester opened a door that revealed a small library, instead. Anne

de Bourgh was seated under the window with a fur rug across her knees and a shawl draped over her shoulders. Elizabeth was immediately pleased to see that she was looking much better and she thanked the butler quickly as he held the door open for her to pass.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Anne said with a small smile. “I am so pleased that you could come.”

“I could not decline your invitation,” Elizabeth said. “I have brought you something.”

“Another gift?”

Elizabeth passed her new friend the packet of tea and then sank into a nearby chair and retrieved Jane’s recipes from an inner pocket of her cloak. “I wrote to my sister, Jane, she is staying in London with our aunt and uncle,” Elizabeth explained. “And their cook has offered some suggestions for a diet that might be easier on your stomach...”

Anne’s eyes widened. “You did not tell them of my condition?”

Elizabeth felt a small stab of guilt, but pushed it away. Anne’s health was more important than some embarrassment from having her condition discussed by people she would likely never meet.

“No, indeed. I asked on behalf of my own curiosity, and for Charlotte who is having trouble with heavier foods at the moment. She has been asking for soups and things that are well out of season and I had hoped for some guidance from someone who had more experience on the subject.”

“I see,” Anne said, but Elizabeth could feel the suspicion in the young woman’s gaze.

“I can assure you that I did not mention anything about yourself, or your condition,” Elizabeth promised. It *was* true, she had asked after recipes that might curb Charlotte’s strange cravings, but Jane had seen through her questions and asked that Mrs. Gardiner’s cook provide something a little more specific to Elizabeth’s needs.

Anne’s eyebrow rose slightly and she leaned forward to peer at

the papers in Elizabeth's hands. "What is it?"

Elizabeth smiled and handed the papers over. Anne unfolded them carefully and scanned the cook's neat writing.

"This seems very boring," Anne said.

"It is, I am afraid. A simple broth with some small vegetables for nutrients... when you are feeling your worst, it will be a welcome change from meat, potatoes and sweetbreads."

"Mother will not like this," Anne said. "She is very insistent that I eat everything that is prepared without exception."

"Has the tea helped?"

Anne nodded. "It has. The pain is still present, but it is less. I am feeling much better today."

"I can see it in your cheeks," Elizabeth said with a smile.

"Will you take this to Mrs. Allen?" Anne asked. "She is the one who prepares all of our meals."

Elizabeth flinched just a little. She had never thought that she would have to act as an advocate on Anne's behalf. If Lady Catherine was opposed to any changes in the menu at Rosings Park, she might not look upon this intrusion with any kindness. But, it was due to Elizabeth's own curiosity that she had come to this point, and she could not back away from her duty now.

"Of course, I shall be happy to," she said with a smile that she hoped was reassuring. Anne's expression was close to pleading, and Elizabeth felt a twinge of responsibility for the young woman's well-being. She had gone far enough to ask a relative stranger for advice on the subject, therefore it should be her responsibility to see it through.

"Thank you," Anne sighed. "She seems to be a pleasant woman, though I have not spoken to her on many occasions."

Elizabeth was struck by a sudden thought. "How long has she been in service here?"

Anne shook her head. "I do not know. I feel as though I was present for her hiring, and Mother's approval of the new staff... but I could not say."

“Does her Ladyship select all of the new staff herself?”

Anne nodded. “Mrs. Brandon does the initial interviews, but my mother could not allow anyone to make the final decision without her own examination and approval.”

Elizabeth wondered if everything in Lady Catherine's orbit came under the same scrutiny.

“Does it seem strange to you,” Anne asked.

“It does,” Elizabeth said. “However, I come from a very small household, and Mrs. Hill has been with the family since before I was born.”

Anne nodded and the gesture appeared somewhat sad. “I remember the day that my governess finished her time with us, it was very sad. She had been here for such a long time.”

“I remember that day as well,” Elizabeth said. Her own governess had been dismissed soon after Lydia had her twelfth birthday and she thought of the woman often.

“But, no matter,” Anne said briskly. “Mother says that we must not be attached to such people.”

“And why not?” Elizabeth asked. She was genuinely surprised by Anne's words.

“Then it is not so hurtful when they leave or are sent away,” Anne said simply. “Will you speak to Mrs. Allen? I am expecting my mother to send someone to call me for luncheon shortly. As soon as it is served, you will be able to speak with her.”

Elizabeth blanched just a little and her stomach knotted with sudden hunger. She should have known better than to expect that she would be invited to stay to eat with them, but more than that, if someone were directing the cook to put something in Anne's food, Mrs. Allen might be reluctant to change what was being prepared... and there was the added pressure of knowing that Lady Catherine was strict with her staff. If Mrs. Allen wanted to avoid scolding, or perhaps being let go from her position for going against her Ladyship's wishes, all of Elizabeth's efforts could be for nothing, and nothing would change for poor Anne.

“Of course,” she said. “An excellent idea. The kitchen will be quiet and she will be able to speak with me.”

“Precisely,” Anne said firmly. “Could you ring the bell? When the maid comes, I will have her take you down to the kitchens.”

Elizabeth rose from her chair and did as she was asked and pulled the silken cord that would ring a bell down in the servery.

She had precious little time to gather her courage for her assignment, but it would have to be enough. Anne tucked the linen bag of herbs into her book and set it down upon the small table beside the couch. “I have asked the maids to bring me only hot water with no tea leaves,” she said. “Then I am able to put my own tea into the pot without fear of being discovered. I could not imagine what mother would say if she knew that I was taking a country remedy for my stomach pains.”

Elizabeth did not like the fact that Anne had to hide what she was doing, but it did not seem as though she had any other option.

A soft knock on the door caught Elizabeth by surprise as she undid her cloak and laid it over her arm. She took the recipes from Anne’s outstretched hand as the door opened and a maid appeared in the doorway.

“Miss Anne,” she said. “I am sent to tell you that luncheon has been served. Her Ladyship awaits your company in the dining room.”

“Thank you,” Anne replied. She rose from the couch and smiled briefly at Elizabeth, but noticed the maid’s suspicious look. “You will not tell anyone that I have a guest,” she said sharply.

“No, Miss Anne,” the girl replied swiftly. She disappeared from the doorway and Anne laid a hand upon Elizabeth’s arm.

“Wait here, someone from the kitchens will be here shortly to take you to Mrs. Allen.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth said.

Anne left the room, and Elizabeth began to pace as she removed her gloves and tried to decide what she should say to Rosings Park’s cook. It must seem like a suggestion, not a

judgement upon the woman's skill in the kitchen or an imposition upon her time. The recipes were simple and could be delegated to one of the scullery maids if necessary. There would be no need to order new produce or ingredients, and Lady Catherine might not even notice that the soup that came with Anne's usual dinner meal had been replaced.

Anne would have to do her part as well and not reveal and surprise, or dislike, at the change. It would be a delicate balance, and she hoped that her actions would not cause any trouble for herself, or for Anne.

"Yes, Miss?"

Elizabeth smiled at the maid who appeared at the door. She was dressed more roughly than the maid who had come to the door to fetch Anne, and her face was red from the heat of the kitchens.

"You are to take me to Mrs. Allen," she said. "Miss Anne has requested it."

The girl gestured for her to follow. "This way, Miss," she said brightly.

Elizabeth had expected some kind of reluctance, or even an argument, and was caught off guard by the girl's acceptance of her words. She hurried to keep up and followed the maid down an unfamiliar set of stairs that led down to the kitchens and the servants' quarters.

The heat of the ovens made Elizabeth's breath catch in her throat and she straightened her shoulders as the girl led her through another small corridor that opened into another area of the kitchen that she had not seen before.

The kitchen maids and cooks were leaning against the tables, eating pieces of leftover meat and bread as they cleaned the dishes and pots they had used.

"Mrs. Allen," the girl called out. "Someone to see you. Miss Anne sent her."

A pleasant faced woman with a wide bosom and plump cheeks

looked up from what she was doing and wiped her hands upon her apron.

“Well send her over, Mary, no sense standing by the oven like a fool.”

The girl flushed darker and turned away as Elizabeth stepped forward to greet the cook.

“Mrs. Allen,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “My name is Elizabeth Bennet, I am... I am a friend of Miss de Bourgh, and she has asked me to speak with you about her meals.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed slightly, but Elizabeth thought she might have imagined it for the woman smiled instantly. “How lovely, there is nothing I enjoy talking about more than food. Do you spend much time in the kitchen, Miss Bennet?”

“I do not,” Elizabeth confessed. “But I have very much enjoyed every meal that I have experienced here at Rosings, which, I am certain, is all due to your own expertise.”

“I thank you,” the cook said with a bright laugh. “It is not so often that we receive compliments from upstairs.”

“Well, I am happy to pass my own congratulations along,” Elizabeth said with some measure of embarrassment. It did not surprise her that Lady Catherine did not speak to her servants very often, but someone like her Ladyship would expect everything to be perfect. Something which did not require praise when it was delivered as expected.

Elizabeth vowed never to be such a mistress. If she was pleased with something, she would be certain to let everyone know about it. It seemed like the polite thing to do, afterall.

“What can I do for you, Miss Bennet,” Mrs. Allen asked curiously. “It is not often that we have a visitor in the kitchen from upstairs, and even more rare to have a friend of Miss Anne’s visit us on her behalf.”

“Yes, of course.” Elizabeth held out the recipes. “You will know that Miss de Bourgh has not been well, and I have taken the liberty of procuring some recipes for meals that will not be so difficult for

her to digest... Her condition is somewhat fragile, and the heavy meals that her Ladyship orders are not helpful to her recovery.”

Mrs. Allen unfolded the recipes and scanned them quickly. She frowned, but the reaction was replaced with another bright smile and Elizabeth questioned whether or not she had seen the woman’s expression falter.

“This is a very simple request,” she said. “Why did Miss Anne feel that she could not make it herself. Any requests for meals come to me through Mrs. Brandon—”

“Please,” Elizabeth said quietly. “She did not wish to trouble Mrs. Brandon, nor did she wish to upset her Ladyship by requesting something different. Perhaps you would be able to make these dishes for Anne alone, without anyone else knowing?”

She pointed at the recipes in Mrs. Allen’s hand. “This one, for example, could be substituted for the evening soup... And this one for the vegetable course. Lady Catherine need not know that anything has changed.”

It felt almost foolish to beg for secrecy, but Mrs. Allen did not seem affected by her nervousness.

“It is a kind thing that you are doing, Miss Bennet,” she said. “But Mr. Chester oversees every meal that leaves my kitchens... I could not hide anything from them.”

Elizabeth felt some of her confidence fade. “Could you try?” she asked. “For Miss de Bourgh’s sake. I fear that...” She paused and looked around the kitchen, but the rest of the staff seemed not to be looking at them—but that did not mean they were not listening. “I fear that Miss de Bourgh’s meals have been tampered with,” she said. “And I should like to protect her from further harm...”

Mrs. Allen nodded and patted Elizabeth’s arm reassuringly. “I will see what I can do, Miss Bennet.”

Her smile should have been comforting, but Elizabeth could not be certain. “Please, keep the recipes,” she said, but Mrs. Allen shook her head and handed them back.

The cook tapped her fingertip against her temple and smiled. “I

have them all locked away in here, Miss Bennet. I would not put myself at risk of being discovered.”

Elizabeth blanched. She had not thought about the cook being discovered with the recipes. Surely, Lady Catherine would not send anyone to search the kitchens... that seemed utterly ridiculous. But she could not argue with the woman, Mrs. Allen had barely agreed to help her, and she would have to be content with that.

“How will you be leaving?” Mrs. Allen asked suddenly.

“Oh, I had not thought of such—”

Mrs. Allen snapped her fingers and the same maid who had brought Elizabeth down to the kitchens appeared. Flour dusted her red cheeks and her eyes were wide.

“Mary, go to the stables and send Norris up to the house with a carriage. Miss Bennet would like to leave now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the girl cried. She scampered through the kitchen and disappeared through the door that Elizabeth had been brought through on her last visit to Rosings Park.

“Norris will take you back to the parsonage,” Mrs. Allen said. “Would you like to take something back for Mrs. Collins? Is she enjoying her meat as Dr. Gannet prescribed?”

Elizabeth’s chest tightened for just a moment, but then she remembered that everything they had been given at the parsonage had been prepared here in the kitchens at Rosings, Mrs. Allen would know everything about what they ate. Alice reported to her, afterall.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Elizabeth lied. Charlotte had not taken well to the meat at all, and the bulk of it usually ended up being given to Mr. Collins who seemed very pleased about it. “Mrs. Collins has been very grateful.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Mrs. Allen said as she bustled around the kitchen and spread a clean square of linen upon the counter. She placed a quarter of cheese, a small loaf of fresh bread, and several small pastries upon it and tied it gently before handing the bundle to Elizabeth. “Take these back with you for your own luncheon, I

can hear your stomach rumbling from a mile away.”

Elizabeth smiled self-consciously and took the bundle. “Thank you,” she said. “You are very kind.”

“Make no mention of it,” she said. “It is the very least I can do for someone who cares so much for their friends.”

“The carriage is here, ma’am!” Mary’s shout pierced the quiet hum of the kitchens and Elizabeth almost dropped her bundle of food.

“That girl,” Mrs. Allen said with a shake of her head. She reached for Elizabeth’s cloak and helped her into it. She stared into Elizabeth’s eyes as she knotted the ribbon at Elizabeth’s throat and Elizabeth gasped as it pinched her skin.

“There now, ready for the weather,” Mrs. Allen said with a maternal smile. “Off you go, and no more worry for Miss de Bourgh’s meals.”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth stumbled a little as the woman nudged her in the direction of the door. The other cooks moved out of her way as she passed and she smiled at them somewhat awkwardly as she walked through their number. She fled into the courtyard and almost leapt through the open carriage door.

The driver’s expression was one of amused surprise as he closed the door and clambered up into his seat. As the carriage lurched into motion, Elizabeth could not decide why she felt the way she did. Mrs. Allen had been very kind, but there was something unsettling about her kindness. As though she had been expecting Elizabeth’s arrival, or had anticipated what she would ask.

But that was, of course, impossible.

She could only hope that the cook would do as she was asked—or would attempt it at the very least. Anne was depending on her.

Elizabeth waited nervously for any word from Anne, but

Alice had no notes to deliver, and the girl acted strangely whenever Elizabeth tried to question her.

Charlotte's own sensitivity to food had decreased, and she had been making more attempts to eat the meat that was provided for her. She knew how expensive such things were, especially during the winter, and Elizabeth suspected that her friend was experiencing some small twinges of guilt for not eating as her doctor had prescribed.

"I shall be exhausted with food," she moaned one afternoon. "Dr. Gannet will not be satisfied until I have consumed an entire cow with my tea."

"That may indeed surprise him enough to warrant a reaction," Elizabeth laughed.

"Have you learned anything new about Miss de Bourgh," Charlotte asked softly. Mr. Collins was in his study, and she did not want to run the risk of his overhearing their conversation.

Elizabeth rose from her chair, walked quickly to the other side of the room, checked the corridor, and then pushed the parlor door closed. "I have not learned anything new," she said softly as she returned to her chair. "I had taken some recipes to Mrs. Allen, the cook, and requested that they be prepared for Anne instead of the heavier fare that her mother prefers."

Charlotte's eyes widened. "And what did she say?"

Elizabeth sighed. "She said that she would try, but every meal that leaves the kitchens is overseen by the housekeeper and butler. She did not want to be seen to be disobeying her mistresses orders."

"No, indeed," Charlotte breathed. "How did Anne appear to you when you saw her last?"

"She was looking much better," Elizabeth said. "The color had returned to her cheeks and she seemed stronger. She was in a library reading when I arrived."

"That is encouraging," Charlotte said. "Strange that you would not have heard anything from her."

"Indeed."

"Lizzy," Charlotte said suspiciously. "Do you have some thought as to what is happening?"

"I may," Elizabeth said. "But I cannot be certain that it is correct."

Elizabeth drummed her fingers upon the table as Charlotte stared at her. "Lizzy..."

"What if someone is trying to make Anne de Bourgh ill..."

Charlotte brought a hand to her mouth to smother her horrified gasp. "But who would ever do such a thing?"

"I do not know," Elizabeth confessed. "I had wondered if Lady Catherine had made any enemies who would want to do the family harm... but poisoning is so much more personal."

"Poison?" Charlotte whispered. "Do you really believe it could be?"

"I do not know what other cause there could be for her illness," Elizabeth sighed. "She seems to be well enough in the morning, but is ill after luncheon and by supper she is bed-ridden. The symptoms last for several days, and then suddenly fade away." She shook her head. "I cannot think of what else it might be."

"It does seem to be the most obvious solution," Charlotte mused. "But who could be the culprit? The cook?"

"Mrs. Allen seems very charming," Elizabeth said. "And she was

concerned about Anne's health... enough to say that she would do what she could to help with her meals."

"And no one else in the household has become ill. Nor have any of us fallen victim to any malady."

Elizabeth tapped her fingers on the table thoughtfully. "Indeed, and Lady Catherine is just as watchful over your menu and diet as she is over the meals served at her own table. Which means that my original suspicion of spoiled preserves cannot be correct..."

"Then what could it be?" Charlotte breathed.

"It is a mystery, indeed," Elizabeth replied. "I had hoped to have another invitation to Rosings, but I have not heard anything from Anne in days."

"You should ask Mr. Collins. Surely, he would know if she is unwell."

Elizabeth had no doubt that Mr. Collins might know something, but she was reluctant to ask him lest he begin to wonder what her interest in Anne de Bourgh might be. The very last thing she wanted was to have to explain herself to the parson.

Elizabeth did have another thought—but she had not yet spoken it aloud. It was a bold assumption. And a terrifying one at the same time. "What if it were Lady Catherine who was the malevolent force behind her own daughter's illness?"

This time Charlotte could not mask her horror. "Lizzy! How could you even think—"

"I do not know," Elizabeth said. She glanced nervously at the door, worried that Mr. Collins might have heard Charlotte's outburst. "But I have never seen a mother so disinterested in her child's well-being. Anne herself speaks of how her mother has grown weary of her malady. Lady Catherine herself is under the impression that Anne is pretending to be ill!"

"Pretending! But why would she do such a thing?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I do not believe that she would, but Lady Catherine seems convinced of just that."

"How horrible. The poor girl."

"It is difficult to think of such things," Elizabeth said. "But if her Ladyship is, indeed, the one giving instruction for Anne to be poisoned, what could we do about it? The servants will not act against her, and Mr. Collins would never believe me if I told him of my suspicions."

"No, indeed," Charlotte said softly. "You must find irrefutable evidence. You must find the truth of it. It is the only way."

"I cannot disagree," Elizabeth said.

She was about to say more, but the parlor door opened suddenly and Mr. Collins' smiling face appeared in the doorway. "Dearest," he said brightly. "I am away to Rosings Park at her Ladyship's command. Might I carry your best wishes with me?"

Charlotte smiled wanly. "Of course," she replied.

"Mr. Collins," Elizabeth blurted out. "Might I ask you for a small kindness?"

The parson blinked at her in confusion. "What might that be?"

"Would you delay your departure until I have written a small letter? I wish to write to Miss de Bourgh."

Mr. Collins' smile was bewildered, but he did not argue. "Of course, cousin, I shall await your letter. Though I must say that Miss de Bourgh has been quite ill these past days—I would not expect a reply to come with any speed."

Elizabeth's smile faltered and a strange coldness crept over her. "Indeed?"

"Yes, it is most upsetting for her Ladyship, she had planned ever so carefully to take Miss de Bourgh with her to London in a few day's time, but it seems that shall not occur... Her Ladyship, you see, is doing her utmost to arrange a suitable marriage for her daughter—"

"Of course," Elizabeth said quickly. "How upsetting for her Ladyship to have her plans delayed."

"They shall not be delayed," Mr. Collins replied. "She will, of course, depart for London, and she has asked for my humble self to accompany her so that I may see how preparations for Christmas

services are progressing in London.”

Charlotte shifted in her chair. “To London? In this snow?”

Mr. Collins smiled as though Charlotte were a child who had asked him to explain why the birds flew south every winter. “Of course, my dear. You must think of our son, and should not worry. Her Ladyship has every confidence that as soon as we depart Hunsford that the snow will lessen and we shall have clear roads all the way to London.”

“How long will you be gone?” Charlotte asked.

“Dr. Gannet will arrive tomorrow, and he will stay at Rosings Park should you need anything. And, indeed, my cousin will be here to cheer you and distract you from your worries.”

“Thank you,” Charlotte murmured, but Elizabeth could not hear any gratitude in her friend’s tone.

“I shall write my letter quickly,” Elizabeth said. Mr. Collins moved out of her way and she dashed out into the corridor and up the stairs to her bedchamber. She pulled out her writing box and wrote a small note asking after Anne’s health and that she had prepared another mixture of tea for her if she wanted it.

Elizabeth was careful not to mention anything about coming to visit the house in anticipation that the letter might be read by Lady Catherine or Mr. Collins. She did not want to arouse any suspicion. Anne would hopefully be able to draw her own conclusions from the letter and would either respond through the kitchen maid, or send a carriage.

She folded the letter, but did not seal it, and returned to the parlor to give it to Mr. Collins.

“You are very kind,” she said with the sweetest smile she could muster. “I am ever so concerned about Miss de Bourgh’s health.”

“As are we all,” Mr. Collins said quickly. “Now, if you will excuse me, I must away to her Ladyship.”

He kissed Charlotte’s cheek briskly and bowed his head to Elizabeth before leaving them alone in the parlor once more.

“To London,” Charlotte said as she heard the front door of the

parsonage slam closed. They watched Mr. Collins trudge through the snow toward the gate and Charlotte shook her head. "I do not mind that he is away from the parsonage so often, I do not mind being alone. But it is the timing that I do not like. I am due to give birth within weeks, and he has found every opportunity to be away."

"Do not trouble yourself, Charlotte," Elizabeth said soothingly. "That is why I am here. To distract you from such things."

"I am more preoccupied with your own mystery," Charlotte said. "Will you go to Rosings Park in her Ladyship's absence?"

Elizabeth nodded. "I would like to. Perhaps Anne will feel that she can speak more freely while her mother is away."

Charlotte nodded and looked out the window at the black shape of her husband as he struggled through the snowy path that led up to Rosings Park.

"Perhaps she will."

Mr. Collins was all bustle and excitement as he prepared for his journey to London. It was very clear to Elizabeth that he would return filled with even more effusive praise for the generosity of his patroness and more ideas for his growing responsibility over Christmas, which seemed to be approaching ever faster.

Even though he seemed to spend little time at the parsonage, Elizabeth was looking forward to his departure with great anticipation. Charlotte, for her part, seemed more frustrated with her husband's eagerness to depart Hunsford, and Elizabeth could only assume that it was to do with the nearness of the birth and her own anxieties than anything Mr. Collins provided in terms of support or care.

Early in the morning, on the day of Mr. Collins' departure, the new kitchen maid, Margaret, brought a letter for Elizabeth with her tea.

Elizabeth thanked her, but she was somewhat suspicious of the girl. She did her job well, and always arrived at the parsonage early in the morning, but she had not had an answer when Elizabeth had asked after Alice's whereabouts and had not met Elizabeth's eyes when speaking to her. She could have assumed that the girl's reluctance was due in part to her deference to her role in the household, but Elizabeth suspected that it was not. Alice had not been friendly by any means, but she had been a good source of information, and had provided a link between herself and Anne... What could have happened to take her away from Rosings Park and her duties to Mrs. Allen? Was she gone, or had she taken ill?

If it were something as simple as an illness, surely Margaret would have said so. There would have been no need for silence or a refusal to speak on the subject.

With Charlotte upstairs sleeping, Elizabeth was alone in the parlor. Mr. Collins was in his study, and Elizabeth could hear him bustling around the room, no doubt packing his important books and papers for his journey with Lady Catherine.

She unfolded the note and read Anne's shaking handwriting with a pang of pity. Even her letters were thin and frail.

Dear Miss Bennet,

I am sorry I have not written, I have not been myself these past days. If you would like to visit, I would be glad of your company, and your excellent tea. I shall send a carriage this afternoon. If you cannot come, please send a note with the driver.

Yours,

~ Anne

Elizabeth frowned at the letter and read it once more. She had not made any mention of Alice, either.

What had happened to the girl?

Elizabeth tucked the letter into her pocket and stood up from her chair. She was tired of not having answers to her questions.

She strode purposefully toward the kitchens, determined to confront Margaret about Alice's whereabouts. She also needed to make a fresh mixture of tea for Anne, but if she could discover the truth while she was at it, so much the better.

Margaret was bent over the fire when Elizabeth entered and the girl looked up in surprise as the door creaked open.

"Miss Bennet," she said brightly. "What can I do for you? Was your tea not to your liking?"

Elizabeth smiled and went directly to the cupboard where the dried herbs were kept. She took down the items she needed and set them onto the table in front of her with purposeful precision.

"The tea was lovely, thank you," Elizabeth said.

The girl wiped her hands on her apron and hovered nervously at the edge of the table as Elizabeth began to measure the herbs into a small bowl. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Elizabeth glanced up at her and smiled again. "There is something you can help me with," she said.

"Anything at all," came the eager reply.

"How is Alice?" she asked bluntly. "I have not heard anything of her for weeks. Has she taken ill? Or gone to visit relatives, perhaps?"

Margaret was silent and Elizabeth looked up to see the girl's hands twisted in her apron.

"Margaret?"

"I— I confess I do not know," she stammered. The girl's cheeks were pale, even though she had just been so close to the fire and Elizabeth was instantly suspicious.

"Are you happy with your employment, Margaret?" she asked.

"I— of course, Miss. Very happy. Rosings Park is a wonderful

house, and her Ladyship is a wonderful mistress. I could not ask for a better position.”

Elizabeth nodded and resisted the urge to grimace. She had very little doubt that the position was a good one, but to imagine Lady Catherine de Bourgh as a good mistress was beyond her capacity.

“Are the other servants happy?” she asked.

“I— I couldn’t say.”

“Come now,” Elizabeth said sweetly. “You work with so many other girls in the kitchens, surely some of them are displeased with their work... I’m sure there are times when one of them does not return to work after a hard day. If Mrs. Allen were to be cross with me, or Mrs. Brandon were to shout at me, I do not know if I could bear to work there afterwards.”

Elizabeth glanced up at Margaret briefly as she spooned more chamomile flowers into the bowl. The girl’s eyes were wide, but she had released her tight grip on her apron and her hands were clenched into small fists at her sides.

“Do you see the other girls chastised?” she asked carefully.

“Yes,” Margaret choked out.

“Was Alice scolded for something?”

“Many times.”

“Did she leave? You can tell me, Margaret. I will not say anything to Mrs. Allen or her Ladyship. I am simply curious. Alice worked here for several weeks, and Mrs. Collins is concerned about her.”

Elizabeth did not know if Charlotte cared one way or the other, she had not seemed to notice the change in kitchen maids, but she was preoccupied with her own condition and could not be blamed for the oversight.

“I— I don’t know what happened to her,” Margaret said in a rush. “One day she was workin’ alongside me makin’ bread, and the next day she was gone.”

Gone?

“Did she take ill?”

Margaret shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

The girl’s manners had departed along with her posture and her shoulders slumped dejectedly as she stood at the edge of the table.

“Did Mrs. Allen say anything to you?”

“Only that I was to take over Alice’s duties at the parsonage,” she said. Her eyes had filled with tears and she rubbed her knuckles into her eyes to keep them from spilling over her suddenly flushed cheeks.

“Nothing more?”

The girl shook her head furiously.

A bell on the kitchen wall rang and Margaret jumped. Charlotte was awake and would want her tea and washing water.

“May I go outside?” she begged. “I need to fetch more water for Mrs. Collins.”

Elizabeth smiled reassuringly. “Of course.”

Margaret rushed from Elizabeth’s presence without saying anything more. She yanked open the kitchen door and fled into the snowy morning without taking a shawl.

Elizabeth set down the jar of dried chamomile and stirred her tea mixture thoughtfully. She had not meant to upset the girl, but at least she had obtained the answers she sought. At least... she thought she had.

Perhaps there would be more answers to be found at Rosings Park, though she did not know if asking Mrs. Allen would be the correct approach.

A short time later, before Charlotte had emerged from her bedchamber, Lady Catherine’s grand carriage arrived at the parsonage gate. Mr. Collins had been pacing the foyer for the

better part of an hour and his agitation was preying upon Elizabeth's nerves.

"We shall not be in London for very many days," Mr. Collins said as he lifted his bags. He looked up the stairs, but Charlotte had not yet appeared. Elizabeth had thought that she would come to bid her husband goodbye, but she may have been too exhausted. Dr. Gannet had prescribed bedrest for the remainder of her pregnancy, but Charlotte had stubbornly refused, saying that walking the house made the ache in her back lessen somewhat.

"I know that you will take every care with Charlotte," he said with a nervous smile. The carriage was outside the parsonage gate, and Elizabeth could see that every moment he delayed in leaving was causing him a great deal of distress.

"I shall, indeed," Elizabeth said. "I wish you a safe journey and a safe return."

Mr. Collins bowed his head graciously and then opened the front door. It was cold, and Elizabeth braced herself for the rush of frigid air that swept over her as Mr. Collins stepped out into the late morning air.

Elizabeth walked to the steps and raised her hand in greeting toward the carriage. A shadowy figure moved inside the carriage, and Elizabeth could only guess that it was her Ladyship. Of course, she would not deign to wave her hand or make any kind of greeting, but that did not mean Elizabeth could not extend the courtesy.

She disliked the woman, but that was no reason to be impolite.

Mr. Collins thrust his valise at the footman, who struggled to place it on top of the carriage with Lady Catherine's trunks. Their stay in London would be a short one, but it seemed as though her Ladyship had packed enough for weeks away. Elizabeth hoped that such a thing would not be the case, Charlotte was already stretched to the breaking point with the stress of the coming child and she would not take the news of her husband's extended absence kindly.

Mr. Collins stepped up into the carriage and waved to Elizabeth

as the door closed. She smiled thinly as the driver snapped his whip and the carriage lurched into motion. The wheels slid somewhat in the snow, and Elizabeth wondered why her Ladyship had not chosen a sleigh, instead. With any luck, the roads would be clear as they neared London as Mr. Collins had said.

She breathed a small sigh of relief as the carriage drew around the corner and disappeared from sight. A small mercy to have some time without the shadow of Lady Catherine de Bourgh looming over the parsonage. Perhaps Charlotte would be able to breathe a little easier as well.

But Elizabeth had another concern. She would be going to Rosings Park to see Ann that day, and she had more questions that needed to be answered.

When Elizabeth arrived at Rosings Park, the house seemed abuzz with activity. Maids swarmed the rooms, cleaning and sorting. They carried buckets of fireplace ash and fresh logs to each room and the house seemed to be swarming with new faces that Elizabeth had never seen.

Mr. Chester, the butler, led her down the corridor with signature silence and Elizabeth had to refrain from satisfying her curiosity with questions. She knew that she would not get any answer that would be suitable from the stone-faced gentleman.

She was led down a familiar corridor toward Anne's bedchamber, and Elizabeth immediately felt a pang as she remembered that the poor young woman had been very ill.

"Please ring if Miss Anne becomes tired," Mr. Chested said as he knocked gently on the white painted door.

"I shall," Elizabeth promised.

The butler's eyebrow rose, but he said nothing more before he opened the door. "Miss Bennet to see you, Miss."

"Thank you, Chester."

Anne was seated in a chair by the fire, wrapped in blankets and furs once more. She looked gaunt and frail and Elizabeth's heart ached to see her so ill.

"Anne, how are you?" she asked as she came into the room.

The butler closed the door behind her and Elizabeth smiled as Anne extended a hand toward her.

"I have, most certainly, felt better," she said.

"How long has it been like this?"

"I have lost count of the days."

"What do your doctors say?"

Anne smiled weakly. "They say whatever they can to make my mother happy. She was ever so angry that I was not able to come to London with her, but I am too ill to travel." She touched her face gently and shook her head. "I do not look fit enough for any husband. They would take one look at me and call for the mortician."

She was attempting to make a joke, but Elizabeth could not laugh.

"Do you know what caused this episode?"

Anne shook her head. "Mrs. Allen was kind enough to have one of the maids bring me a bowl of your soup, and it was delicious... But after supper I was so ill that I could not leave my bed..."

Elizabeth sank down into a chair beside Anne and took her hand. It was cold to the touch. "I am sorry to hear it."

Anne sighed. "I had hoped that your recipe would be a miracle, but it seems that I am not to enjoy them at all."

"How do you feel about your mother leaving for London with you still so ill?" Elizabeth asked the question carefully, unsure of how her new friend would answer.

The expression on Anne's face said more than words ever could. "Mother would not be deterred. She had planned for this outing to be the foundation of a proposal, but it seems that she will not achieve such a thing. She has taken my illness as an insult—a defiance. As though I have some control over what is happening. It seems as though she believes this all to be a pantomime... A joke."

She sighed heavily.

"I do not understand how she could believe such a thing," Elizabeth said softly. "You are, indeed, very ill."

"She does not believe me when I say that I am eager for marriage—but it is more that I am eager to escape this house than

for the marriage itself.”

Elizabeth had suspected as much, but could not put the thought into words.

“It was good of Mr. Collins to attend her for the journey,” Elizabeth said. “He is very devoted to your mother.”

Anne made an unladylike noise and then coughed weakly. “Devoted. Mr. Collins worships her.”

“She is very generous...”

“Oh, indeed. Far too generous.” Anne coughed again and then leaned forward. Her eyes twinkled with something Elizabeth could not identify. She laid a finger against her lips dramatically. “I discovered them together once,” she whispered.

Elizabeth felt cold and sick at the same time. “Together?”

Anne nodded. “I came into the parlor to see my mother and found them sitting together upon the couch, arms entwined!”

“No.” Elizabeth could not mask her horrified gasp. “You do not think—”

“I do, indeed,” she said. “Mr. Collins is much more than my mother’s parson. I believe that there is much more to their relationship than that. He worships her, and caters to her every whim. If she were to make any request of him, he would do it.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. A scandal to be certain. If Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine— but no. It was not possible. The difference in their ages... The difference in their social standing... *Charlotte!*

“I find it more amusing than anything,” Anne continued. “How terribly sad to see a woman of my mother’s age fawning over a man such as Mr. Collins...”

Elizabeth shook her head in surprise. She had never seen Lady Catherine de Bourgh fawn over anything, and even the thought of it was beyond ridiculous. Unthinkable. Preposterous.

But another thought crept into her mind. *Could such a discovery be a motive for murder?*

“What did her Ladyship say when you discovered them?” she asked.

Anne waved her hand dismissively. "Mother demanded to know what I had seen, and I lied and told her that I had seen nothing. But it explains how often I have seen them talking alone together, and now this trip to London... I suppose it should not matter. My father has been dead for many years, I should not begrudge her a little happiness... but how improper for a parson—and with Mrs. Collins pregnant..."

"Indeed," Elizabeth said softly. "A scandal to be sure."

"No one will say anything," Anne said. "The servants are simply happy to have her out of the house. I can hear the noise. I imagine they're cleaning every inch of the house."

Elizabeth nodded, startled at the sudden change of topic. "They are, indeed."

"Mother rarely leaves Rosings, so I imagine they are thankfully to have some time to do their jobs without fear of being shouted at for making too much noise or putting ash on the carpet."

"I can only imagine."

"Have you brought more of your lovely tea?" Anne asked suddenly. "It is the only thing that soothes my stomach pains..."

"I did," Elizabeth said with a smile. She produced the linen bag from a pocket in her cloak. "Shall I ring for a maid?"

Anne took the bag, held it to her nose and inhaled deeply. "Please."

Elizabeth pulled the silken cord to ring the bell in the servery.

"They have been bringing me pots of hot water so that I may use my own tea. Mother has not yet discovered it, but she rarely takes tea with me any more."

"How nice of them," Elizabeth said, and then she remembered another question that required an answer. "Has Alice left service here?"

Anne blinked in confusion and then shook her head. "I could not say. I have not seen her for some weeks, but I rarely see the kitchen staff."

"She has stopped coming to the parsonage," Elizabeth said. "I

was concerned for her health. Perhaps she has taken ill, or gone to visit family.”

“You would have to question Mrs. Brandon,” she said, but Elizabeth could see that there was something that Anne was not saying. Anne had known Alice, and had sent messages through her to the parsonage...

“I may do so, Mrs. Collins is concerned about the girl, and would like an answer.”

Anne nodded. “I do hope you are able to procure a satisfactory one.”

Elizabeth smiled, but she had a feeling that a satisfactory answer would not be forthcoming from any person associated with Rosings Park.

When the maid arrived with tea, she also brought a plate of intricately decorated pastries and Elizabeth exclaimed over their construction.

“Mrs. Allen makes those specially for Miss Anne,” the girl said. “Peach filling from last year’s harvest.”

After she departed, Elizabeth wonders again at all the unfamiliar faces she saw throughout the house. Staff turnover was to be expected in a large house, especially in the lower orders of the staff, but this seemed an egregious amount of change in a wealthy household.

“How lovely,” Elizabeth said.

“You may take them back to the parsonage with you,” Anne said. “I have not had the appetite for anything of late.”

“You are too kind. I am certain that Charlotte will love them.”

Elizabeth poured some of the herbal mixture into the teapot and she spoke to Anne about her life in Hertfordshire, and about her sisters. Anne was overly curious about her sisters and their personalities—she had always wished for a sister, but such a thing

had never been possible.

“I do hope that I will marry a gentleman with a large family,” she said. “It will be ever so different, and I long for a house full of merriment and noise. These corridors are cold and quiet, and I have begun to loathe them.”

“I am certain that you will find just such a gentleman,” Elizabeth said warmly.

“I am not so convinced,” Anne sighed, “but I will hope for such a thing.”

Elizabeth could only smile, for there was nothing she could say to console Anne or convince her that there would be precisely what she wished for in her future. If she did not begin to recover from her illness, there might not be a future for her.

Elizabeth returned to the parsonage feeling no more certain about anything. She had located Mrs. Brandon before her departure, but the woman could not say where Alice had gone, only that she was no longer in her Ladyship’s service. It was a curious puzzle, and one that Elizabeth was worried that she would not be able to solve.

But, she had brought a lovely gift for Charlotte, who would no doubt appreciate a sweet distraction from her worries.

What Elizabeth had learned from Anne about Lady Catherine and Mr. Collins, however, weighed heavily upon her mind. She could not tell Charlotte what she knew, and she did not know whether she could confront Mr. Collins about his... dalliance with his patroness. It would explain his obsessive devotion to her, certainly. But how long had their relationship been thus? Had his marriage to Charlotte simply been a device to mask the truth of his connection to Lady Catherine?

The layers of scandal wove themselves into Elizabeth's mind as she considered what might happen if their relationship were to be exposed... The scandal would taint the parsonage, and all of the parishioners would feel betrayed by one of their own. How would Lady Catherine's circle react to such a thing?

The possibility that Anne's discovery of their tryst was a motive for poison became harder and harder to deny. What other reason would a mother have to kill her own daughter? If Anne were to come between her mother and the only source of happiness in her life—would that not be reason enough?

It could not be true. It was far too shocking.

But if it were, then the whole household would be complicit in murder. The cook would be blamed... Surely, Mrs. Allen would not be privy to such things. She merely prepared the meals. But she had said herself that Mr. Chester and Mrs. Brandon oversaw every plate of food that left the kitchens—they were the most loyal staff members at Rosings Park.

Perhaps they had been coerced into doing her Ladyship's deadly bidding.

Margaret was busy in the kitchen preparing luncheon when Elizabeth arrived, and she placed the muslin wrapped pastries down upon the table without saying a word to the girl. She was far too wrapped up in her own shocking thoughts to say anything, and she feared that if she did speak, that everything on her mind would come tumbling out in an unchecked rush and she would be helplessly carried away by the flood.

She walked through the house briskly and went up the stairs to see Charlotte who was propped up in bed with a book open and braced against her belly.

"Lizzy! I had forgotten that you had gone to Rosings today," Charlotte said brightly. "How is Miss de Bourgh?"

"She is very ill," Elizabeth sighed. "For several days now. She does not look well at all."

"Very fortunate that she did not go to London," Charlotte said.

“She would not have been well enough to travel, surely.”

“Decidedly not,” Elizabeth said. She wanted to tell Charlotte what she had learned, but it was not the right time. And she did not want to make her friend upset. *Especially now*. And her news was *very* upsetting.

“Are you feeling well enough for luncheon?” Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte nodded quickly. “Oh, yes. I am starved. This child has made my appetite uncontrollable.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I have brought you some pastries from Rosings. Lovely little things. Peach filled.”

“Peaches,” Charlotte sighed. “How wonderful. I must write to Miss de Bourgh to thank her.”

“She will be very glad to hear from you,” Elizabeth said. “Shall I ring for some tea?”

“Oh, yes,” Charlotte said. “I did not realize how much time had passed since your departure.”

Elizabeth rose to ring the bell for Margaret to bring them tea and then sat down upon a small plush chair. “When will Dr. Gannet come next?” she asked.

Charlotte sighed and rubbed a hand over her belly. “He should come tomorrow morning, and then again next week. He does not seem to think that there is anything to worry about. The pain in my back is normal, and the urge to walk is also quite normal, though he does discourage me from it.”

“We are fortunate then, that the weather is horrid—if it were summer I believe I would have had a much more difficult task of keeping you indoors.”

“Indeed you would have,” Charlotte laughed.

She set her book down upon the bedside table and looked curiously at the door. “Where is Margaret? She should have come up by now.”

Elizabeth patted Charlotte’s hand gently. Her friend had grown more impatient as her pregnancy advanced. “I shall go down to the kitchen and see what is keeping her.”

Charlotte grimaced and re-adjusted her position on the bed. "Thank you, she is not usually so tardy when the bell is rung."

Elizabeth smiled quickly as Charlotte waved her away, and she left her friend to rearrange her bedcovers and get more comfortable, a feat which, even though she tried to deny it, required more assistance of late.

She descended the stairs with a lightness in her gait. Mr. Collins' absence had made Elizabeth feel lighter, her cousin's oppressive cheer and praise of his patroness was tiresome and she was grateful for the small reprieve. However, when she considered Anne's mention of how she had discovered Mr. Collins in a somewhat... delicate situation with her mother, Elizabeth wondered if Charlotte's irritation at her husband's departure had another meaning.

Did she suspect something?

Or did she know?

Elizabeth was preoccupied with those thoughts as she stepped into the parsonage kitchen, and she stumbled against a sack of flour as she walked through the door. She felt a flare of frustration at her own clumsiness and caught herself before she fell. She glared at the offending sack of flour, and then realized with a terrifying jolt that it was not a sack of flour at all.

"Margaret!"

The kitchen maid was sprawled upon the stone floor. Her face and neck were red and mottled, and Elizabeth reached out to shake the girl's shoulder desperately. "Margaret," she hissed.

Perhaps she had fallen and struck her head upon the stones.

But Elizabeth recoiled in horror as she realized that the maid had not fallen. She was so very still, and her chest did not move to indicate breathing... and no pulse throbbed in her neck.

Elizabeth scrambled back, away from the body and pressed herself against the kitchen wall.

Dead.

But how?

She scanned the room quickly, looking for any clue as to what might have happened. A tray set with a teapot, cups and saucers had been set out on the table. But something else caught her eye. The muslin that Elizabeth had wrapped the pastries Anne had given her lay upon the stone floor, as though it had fallen there accidentally. The pastries themselves had tumbled over the table and fallen to the floor and Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat.

She glanced at poor Margaret's lifeless body and edged closer.

There.

Clutched in the girl's hand was a crushed pastry. The peach filling oozed out over her palm and Elizabeth's hand flew to cover her mouth as she noticed the flesh of the girl's hand was red and angry looking where the filling had touched it.

She had planned to share those pastries with Charlotte—

Not knowing what she should do, Elizabeth had told

Charlotte what she could, and then dressed quickly for the winter weather and marched through the snow to Rosings Park.

She had discovered the gamekeeper, Mr. Nocks, on her way to the house, and the older gentleman was kind enough to fetch his wagon and a strong lad to help him. Elizabeth and Charlotte kept their distance while Margaret's body was taken from the kitchen. Mrs. Allen herself was kind enough to come down and clean the kitchen, and Elizabeth was comforted by her presence in the house.

The woman stayed long enough to make them tea and, though Elizabeth and Charlotte protested, promised that she would return to make supper as well.

"To think that something like that could happen under my own roof," Charlotte whispered. Her eyes were wide as she watched Mr. Nocks clamber up into the driver's seat of his wagon and snap the reins over the horse's back. The wagon drew away, bound for the nearby town where a doctor would see to Margaret's body and her family could be informed of the tragedy.

Elizabeth had not told Charlotte about the peach-filled pastries, or how close she might have come to facing the same fate as poor Margaret. She was under enough stress, and it would do her no good to know such things. If anything happened to Charlotte, Elizabeth would never be able to forgive herself.

"And you, Lizzy, you poor thing, to have found her—"

“There was nothing I could do,” Elizabeth whispered. “It was too late.”

Charlotte patted her hand gently. “Do not dwell upon such things,” she said. “It was a terrible accident. The doctor will tell us what happened. You must not blame yourself.”

Elizabeth shook her head and looked out the window. She *did* blame herself. It was *she* who had brought those pastries into the house.

Pastries that had been meant for Anne.

The sudden thought made Elizabeth’s stomach twist. They had been delivered with her tea—

“I... I must go to Rosings,” Elizabeth said suddenly.

“Whyever for?” Charlotte asked in surprise. “Surely you would prefer to stay here? The stress of the day has been far too much... I, for one, should like to return to bed, but I fear that I shall not be able to shake the horror of such an event from my mind...”

Elizabeth shook her head. She would have written a letter, but there was no one who might have delivered it on her behalf. Mrs. Allen—*could she trust the cook? Or would she be putting information into the hand of the very person who was behind Anne’s illness?*

What if that had been Lady Catherine’s plan? She was away in London, if she were to return to find her daughter had died of her illness it would be a tragedy to be sure... but perhaps a welcome one.

It was too convenient. Too well-planned.

“No, I must go and speak to Miss de Bourgh,” Elizabeth said firmly.

“To Miss de Bourgh?” Charlotte blinked at her in surprise. “Whatever for?”

“I believe she is in danger,” Elizabeth blurted out. She had not told Charlotte of *all* her fears, and she did not intend to now, but Charlotte seemed to realize that there was something on Elizabeth’s mind.

“Then go, by all means... I will return to my bedchamber and

try to sleep. This child is restless today, and I am grateful that I am able to shield her eyes from such things for a little while longer.”

Elizabeth helped her friend up from the table and escorted her up to her bedchamber. At the door, Charlotte turned and pulled Elizabeth into a quick embrace. “Be careful,” she said.

Elizabeth could only smile and squeezed her friend’s hand reassuringly. “I shall return before nightfall. There is nothing to fear.”

Elizabeth’s visit to Rosings Park was, indeed, very short. Anne was still very weak, and could not leave her bed to receive her. Elizabeth sat near her bedside to tell Anne about Margaret’s tragic death, but Anne did not seem surprised to hear of it.

“I had heard some whispering among the maids,” Anne said softly. “One of the girls came in with puffy, red eyes and I demanded that she tell me what was the matter.” Anne’s expression was strange, and Elizabeth wondered if she was afraid. “They say that Margaret had a reaction to the filling in the pastries—the peaches. There was nothing that anyone could have done to help her.”

Elizabeth nodded slowly. “Please promise me that you will not eat any more of those pastries,” she whispered.

“Of course,” Anne replied. “I do not have the appetite for them in any case... The merest thought of eating makes me feel ill.”

Elizabeth’s heart twisted in her chest. Anne looked so frail, and she was worried for her new friend. There was something amiss at Rosings Park, and she had become determined to discover the cause of it.

“My mother returns from London tomorrow,” Anne sighed. “Perhaps she will bring news of an engagement. I should very

much like to leave this bedchamber and never return to this house again.”

“I hope it will be so,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

The chamber door opened and the housekeeper, Mrs. Brandon, strode into the room with purposeful steps. “Miss Bennet, I believe you have overstayed your welcome,” she said tartly.

She was taken aback by the housekeeper’s sharp tone, but did not let her surprise show in her expression. “I will let you sleep,” Elizabeth said softly.

Anne smiled wanly and patted Elizabeth’s hand before she closed her eyes and turned her face away. Elizabeth rose from her chair and followed the housekeeper out of the room and down the corridor.

“A carriage has been called for you, Miss Bennet,” the woman said.

“You are too kind,” Elizabeth said.

“I do hope that you do not plan to come to Rosings Park without an invitation again,” Mrs. Brandon said without turning around.

“I—”

“Her Ladyship does not take kindly to uninvited guests,” Mrs. Brandon continued. “I shall have to report to her that you have been visiting the house without her approval.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together but said nothing in reply.

The housekeeper’s stride did not falter, and Elizabeth followed her down another corridor toward the foyer, stopping only when the woman paused to open one of the great double doors. Elizabeth braced herself for the blast of icy wind that gusted into the foyer.

“If you will wait here, the carriage will be along shortly,” Mrs. Brandon said.

Elizabeth blinked at the woman in surprise. “Outside?”

Mrs. Brandon’s expression did not change. “If you please.”

Elizabeth pulled her shawl around her shoulders and did as she was told. With Lady Catherine away, the ruler of the household

was the housekeeper. Disobeying her orders would not be looked upon kindly, especially if her Ladyship would already be predisposed to be cross with her for coming to Rosings while she was away...

She lifted her chin and stepped over the threshold and out onto the top stair. The snow covered landscape was beautiful to look at, but Elizabeth preferred the view from behind a pane of glass. It was late December, and the wind was very cold. Even with the brief appearance of the sun, it was not enough to give even a hint of warmth, and fat grey clouds carrying the promise of more snow loomed on the horizon.

Elizabeth turned to look back at the housekeeper, and tightened her grip on her shawl.

Mrs. Brandon smiled thinly. "The carriage will be here shortly. Good day, Miss Bennet," she said from the doorway. Before Elizabeth could say anything in reply, the door closed, and the *click* of the latch echoed sharply in her ears.

"How wonderful," Elizabeth muttered. "Such hospitality."

She wrapped her arms around herself in an attempt to stay warm, and wondered if the housekeeper had been lying about the carriage. It would have been a perfect insult to leave her on the doorstep waiting for a carriage that would never arrive. She would be forced to walk back to the parsonage through the snow—a fitting punishment for anyone who broke Lady Catherine's rules.

But Elizabeth was surprised to hear the sound of approaching hoofbeats and she shifted her weight on her feet to try and keep the blood flowing to her slowly chilling toes. But as the carriage came around the corner, Elizabeth's eyes widened in surprise. She did not recognize the horses, or the figure of the driver sitting high above.

The carriage pulled to a stop and a footman jumped down to open the door. Elizabeth stepped back in surprise as a gentleman emerged from the carriage and then her surprise became anger as she recognized his face.

“Mr. Darcy!”

But why would he be here?

She knew, of course, that Lady Catherine de Bourgh was his aunt, but what reason could he have had to be at Rosings Park so close to Christmastide?

“Miss Bennet,” the gentleman said and Elizabeth was somewhat surprised to hear a similar tone of annoyance and surprise in his own voice. “What brings you to Rosings Park?”

Elizabeth straightened her shoulders and tried to ignore the biting cold. “My dear friend Charlotte is with child—I have come to be with her until the birth.”

The gentleman’s eyebrow rose slightly. “And why should you be here and not at the parsonage?”

Anger flared briefly in Elizabeth’s stomach. *Was he teasing her? Or mocking her?*

“I came to see Miss de Bourgh,” Elizabeth said stiffly.

“And her Ladyship?”

“She is in London.”

“I see.”

“Were you expected?” Elizabeth asked. “Mrs. Brandon has been very strict about uninvited guests.”

Mr. Darcy chuckled. “She usually is. I am, indeed, expected, though I did not anticipate that I would arrive while her Ladyship was away.”

“No doubt she will be pleased that you have arrived.” She shivered and pulled her cloak tighter around herself.

“Are you waiting for a carriage?” he asked. Elizabeth could hear amusement in his tone, and she glared at him briefly.

“I am.”

Mr. Darcy shook his head and glanced up at his driver. “Clarke, take Miss Bennet down to the parsonage.”

The man touched his hat and the gentleman stepped away from the carriage and gestured toward the open door. “If you please, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth shook her head. "I will await the carriage that has been called for me," she said.

Mr. Darcy chuckled. "Then you shall be waiting for a very long time. Please, I insist."

Elizabeth pressed her lips into a thin line, and weighed her options. The weak winter sun had begun to set, and if she was to return to the parsonage before nightfall, she would have to leave sooner than later. Perhaps Mrs. Brandon *did* intend for her to trudge through the snow to the parsonage. To teach her a lesson, no doubt. *Horrible woman.*

"I thank you," Elizabeth said stiffly. It was too cold to adhere to her stubborn principles, and the thought of returning to a warm fire and a hot pot of tea was infinitely more appealing than standing upon the stairs in front of Rosings Park to await a carriage that might never arrive.

She placed her gloved hand upon the outstretched palm of the footman and allowed him to help her into the carriage. Mr. Darcy took hold of the door as she settled herself against the seat and pulled a fur across her knees.

He looked as though he wanted to say something, but then thought better of it. "Good day, Miss Bennet," he said instead.

"Good day, Mr. Darcy," she replied just as primly.

The carriage door closed and Elizabeth heard the snap of the driver's whip. The carriage lurched into motion and she breathed a long sigh of relief as it pulled away from Rosings Park and Mr. Darcy's infuriating presence.

She was cold through to her bones, and there was nothing she wanted more than to sit in front of the fire in the parsonage parlor.

But seeing Mr. Darcy again had brought up all manner of memories that she had hoped to forget. Specifically, the horrendous proposal that had taken place and his subsequent admission of his role in Mr. Bingley's departure from Hertfordshire. Elizabeth did not know if she could ever forgive him for such an attack upon her family, and her pride.

“Against my own better judgement, indeed,” she muttered.

She had thought never to see the gentleman again, and, in truth, now that she had seen him, she realized that she had not properly prepared herself for their reacquaintance. Usually, she would spend a good deal of time considering all possible outcomes of an interaction so that she might be prepared for whatever situation would occur. But that practice had failed her on several occasions, especially where Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was concerned.

She had not expected his bluntly offensive proposal, nor his reaction to her hasty and indignant refusal of it.

She pressed her hands to her burning cheeks and tried to shake off her unease. When she had arrived at Hunsford, Elizabeth had been very satisfied with her uncomplicated plan to be with Charlotte until the birth of her child... but then Anne de Bourgh’s illness had overtaken her mind, and now Mr. Darcy’s arrival would complicate matters even further.

Charlotte would be intrigued to hear of the gentleman’s arrival. No doubt she would have a great deal of advice to give her as well. Elizabeth resolved to write to Jane immediately. Not only to tell her of what had happened to Margaret, but of Mr. Darcy’s arrival at Rosings Park... Poor Jane would, no doubt, be adversely affected by such news, and Elizabeth considered the possibility that she might not be able to tell her sister everything that had happened. But she needed Jane’s advice, and if that meant she would have to re-awaken her sister’s thoughts of Mr. Bingley, then so be it.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s return to Rosings Park was met with a mixture of dread and expectation. Elizabeth dreaded her Ladyship’s return because it meant that Mr. Collins was once again

present in the parsonage, and seemed to spend more effort than usual on extolling the virtues of his patroness.

“Cousin, you cannot begin to comprehend the amount of joy and gratitude that fills me upon my return. Lady Catherine herself told me that she takes a singular pleasure in my company.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said.

“I believe, and I think I am fair in saying so, that her Ladyship is beyond reproach in all ways. Why, in London I believe I heard no less than four persons speak so highly of her that it was a wonder that the hostess was even able to keep a smile upon her face.”

Elizabeth nodded and stirred her tea. Charlotte sat across from her and pushed her food about her plate with her fork. Her appetite had been healthy enough while her husband was away, but now that he had returned, it seemed to wane.

“And your plans for Christmastide,” Charlotte asked suddenly.

Mr. Collins beamed at her. “Indeed, my dear, they are well underway. I have returned with ever so many new ideas and inspirations. My mind is fairly bursting with them!”

“How lovely,” Charlotte said.

Mr. Collins had, of course, not been told of the kitchen maid’s death. In fact, he had not asked after any happenings at the parsonage while he had been away. Charlotte had reported dutifully of Dr. Gannet’s visits, but Elizabeth supposed that that good doctor would tell the parson his true assessment of Charlotte’s pregnancy himself when next they met.

“Her Ladyship has been kind enough to invite us all to dine at Rosings Park tomorrow night,” he said brightly. “And I have been informed that her Ladyship would also enjoy our attendance at her Christmas Eve supper.”

“How wonderful,” Charlotte said. “But Dr. Gannet has said that I should not leave the parsonage for any reason—”

“Nonsense, my dear,” Mr. Collins scoffed. “Surely, Dr. Gannet will see the benefit of such an exercise. The food and company will

do you good, and I have been told that Mrs. Allen has been planning a sumptuous feast for her Ladyship's guests!"

"I suppose," Charlotte said.

Mr. Collins turned to Elizabeth. "You will be pleased to know, Cousin, that her Ladyship had several excellent observations about your own character during our journey to London."

Elizabeth looked up from her teacup in surprise. "Did she, indeed."

Mr. Collins smiled broadly. "Quite so, she was very interested in your acquaintance with Miss de Bourgh in particular. As you may know, a young lady of good breeding and society has some difficulty in acquiring companions in her own sphere..."

"Her own sphere," Elizabeth repeated.

"Indeed. And so, her Ladyship has been obliged to allow her daughter to accept female companionship from young ladies such as yourself."

Charlotte's warning glance was the only thing that kept Elizabeth from saying something she would later regret.

"How kind," she said instead.

"Indeed it is," Mr. Collins said appreciatively. "'Collins,' she said, 'I should much rather that my daughter keep company with the like of Miss Bennet than the serving girls.'"

Elizabeth knew from Mr. Collins' smile that she should have made some kind of appreciative noise or gesture, but she could bring herself to do no such thing.

"Then she approves of my presence at Rosings Park?" Elizabeth asked.

"She does, indeed," Mr. Collins said. Elizabeth was suspicious of such a pronouncement, but if it were true, she was thankful that a chance meeting with Lady Catherine in the halls of Rosings Park would not be met with any unexpected rancor. She could shrug away comments made about her social position—for it was nothing to Lady Catherine.

"Then she will not mind if I come to Rosings for tea with Miss

de Bourgh tomorrow,” Elizabeth said brightly. She had been nervous about Lady Catherine’s return to Rosings Park, and Mr. Collins’ presence had kept her from leaving the parsonage for any reason at all.

“I should not see any reason why you should not,” Mr. Collins said. “I shall be attending tea at Lady Catherine’s request tomorrow morning, and you shall come with me.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I shall write to Miss de Bourgh at once,” she said.

“Quite so,” Mr. Collins said with a smile that made Elizabeth’s skin crawl just a little. “I shall be making my way to Rosings this afternoon and shall be very pleased to deliver it.”

Elizabeth paused in her silent planning. She had not expected Mr. Collins to make such a thing so simple. She did not entirely trust the parson, but the new kitchen maid that Mrs. Allen had sent down to work at the parsonage spoke even less than Margaret had, and Elizabeth could not bring herself to trust the girl, either.

So many secrets. So many doubts. And she was suspicious of everyone.

“Very well,” she said.

Mr. Collins rose from his chair and buttoned his jacket. “I shall be in my study.”

Elizabeth smiled weakly as he left the parlor and Charlotte sat back in her chair with a sigh. “So, you will go to Rosings again?”

“It seems so.”

“You have spent a fair amount of time in Miss de Bourgh’s company of late,” Charlotte said.

“Charlotte... are you angry with me?” Elizabeth asked. She tried to keep her tone light, but her friend did, indeed, seem upset.

Charlotte sighed heavily and shifted in her chair. “No. I am not. I confess that I have been quite uninteresting during your stay here.”

“You are *not* uninteresting,” Elizabeth laughed. “You are *pregnant*. The excitement will come with the birth of your child.”

"And everything beforehand is nothing but a nuisance," she muttered.

"Nonsense," Elizabeth said. "If you have been feeling neglected, please just say so. I have been worried for Anne's health, as I have been worried for your own."

Charlotte shook her head. "No, I must apologize. I know that you have a care for Miss de Bourgh's health. Do you truly believe that she is in danger?"

Elizabeth paused for a moment, and then nodded. "I do."

"Is there anything that you can do to help her?"

"I do not know," she said honestly. "But I must try."

"I could not say anything against your intentions," Charlotte said ruefully. "If you believe that Miss de Bourgh is in danger, then I cannot stand in your way."

"If you do not wish for me to go—"

Charlotte held up her hand. "No. No. If you believe that you must go, then I will not stop you. I shall have to prepare myself to meet her Ladyship's request that I attend her dinner invitation." She sighed heavily. "Lady Catherine knows very well that Dr. Gannet has instructed me to stay at the parsonage."

"I presume that she knows very well what Dr. Gannet has advised," Elizabeth said with a small smile. "I can also safely assume that she has convinced the good doctor that you will not be adversely affected by a small outing."

Charlotte made a face. "And an overly heavy meal."

"I am certain that it will be decadent," Elizabeth said. "But perhaps you will find something to tempt you."

"Oh, perhaps," Charlotte relented. "But if I did not have to attend, I would certainly choose to stay here."

Elizabeth smiled warmly. "Then I am glad that you do not have a choice," she said.

"Go and write your letter to Miss de Bourgh," Charlotte said. She tried to hide it, but Elizabeth could see the curve of her friend's smile. Charlotte may have felt miserable, but it was clear

that she was secretly pleased to have been invited to a decadent supper at Rosings Park.

Elizabeth rose from her chair, kissed her friend upon the cheek, and left the parlor to rush up the stairs to write her letter in the relative privacy of her bedchamber.

Mr. Collins delivered Elizabeth's letter faithfully and returned Anne's reply with grand ceremony. Of course, she was welcome to come to Rosings Park for tea, but Elizabeth was more concerned with the shakiness of Anne's handwriting. She was still certain that Anne was ill, but Anne seemed not to want to mention that anything was out of the ordinary.

Perhaps it was because she knew that her mother would read her letter... Mr. Collins certainly seemed to know the contents of it before he had even delivered it.

Mr. Collins also did not seem worried about Anne's malady, and even though Elizabeth enquired about her new friend's condition, he instead spoke endlessly of her Ladyship's plans for the annual decoration of Rosings Park which would be undertaken in short order.

Elizabeth did her best to listen, but her mind was elsewhere and she could not respond as she was supposed to.

"Cousin, do you not have anything to say on this subject?" Mr. Collins asked.

Elizabeth paused, her fork inches from her lips. "I beg your pardon?"

"Mr. Collins was wondering if you agreed with her Ladyship's thought to place the pine boughs over the archways in the corridors as well as the fireplace hearths," Charlotte said.

Elizabeth almost dropped her knife. "Oh," she breathed. Mr.

Collins' stare was insistent. "Of course," she said. "I could not think of a better pairing."

It was a decoration that was often employed at Longbourn; that Lady Catherine had only just decided that it would be an excellent addition to the decorations at Rosings Park was very confusing to Elizabeth. It seemed the most logical option and she was mystified that Lady Catherine de Bourgh had not attempted such a decor pattern in her own home before.

"Quite so, quite so."

Charlotte complained of a headache partway through supper, and Elizabeth was grateful to leave the table to assist her.

Mr. Collins followed them to the stairs, but did not offer his arm to his wife to help guide her progress. Charlotte leaned heavily on Elizabeth and she was hard pressed not to glare at the parson as they passed him at the foot of the stairs. "I shall be leaving for Rosings at ten," Mr. Collins said jovially. "Her Ladyship is not fond of tardiness."

"I am well aware," Elizabeth said. "I shall be ready."

"Excellent, most excellent, indeed."

He bid them goodnight and returned to the dining room to finish his supper and Elizabeth sighed heavily and helped Charlotte to her bedchamber before realizing that she was also exhausted. It was early enough in the evening, but Elizabeth's head was full of questions and suspicions, and nothing could be done about any of it until the morning.

T rue to his word, Mr. Collins was awake and moving about the house well before the allotted time. Elizabeth, as per her usual habit, had been awake for hours. The new kitchen maid really was a mouse of a girl. She delivered tea when the bell was rung, took away linens for washing, and then departed without saying a word. Elizabeth wondered why she had been chosen for the position, and

came to the conclusion that Mrs. Allen had sent her to keep watch over what happened in the parsonage. Although, whether the cook was acting on her own suspicions, or those of Lady Catherine de Bourgh remained to be seen.

Charlotte was content to stay in bed that morning, and Elizabeth forced herself to smile as her friend begged her to tell Mr. Collins that she was not unwell, merely tired. Charlotte did, indeed, look exhausted, and Elizabeth hoped that there was not more to her lethargy than she let on.

Perhaps she would ask Mr. Collins to inquire after Dr. Gannet. The accoucheur was not overdue for a visit, but it could not hurt to have him come to the parsonage for a brief exam.

When she came downstairs, Elizabeth found Mr. Collins taking tea in the parlor and she sighed inwardly at the loss of any time to sit quietly before being forced into his company in the carriage.

“Ah, Cousin,” he said brightly. “You are prepared for our visit?”

“Indeed, I am,” she replied.

“You needn’t worry about your plainness of dress,” he said. “For her Ladyship is very understanding about societal norms, and appreciates that your own position is very different from her own. She does, of course, want all of her guests to feel comfortable at Rosings Park, you see.”

“I see,” Elizabeth said. She had not given a second thought to the dress she had chosen for her visit to Rosings Park. She had not brought many gowns with her as she had not expected to leave the parsonage on very many occasions. And she had certainly not brought anything, nor did she own anything, that would have been equal to her Ladyship’s extensive wardrobe. Anne had never mentioned such a thing, and Elizabeth was thankful that her new friend did not seem to hold the same opinions as her mother when it came to condescension.

The carriage ride was as uneventful as it could be. There had been no fresh snow the night before, but a sudden chill had set a crust of ice over everything and Elizabeth relished the sound of the

carriage wheels as they crashed through it.

“You will, of course, see Lady Catherine on your visit,” Mr. Collins said.

“If her Ladyship wishes it,” Elizabeth replied. She had not expected Lady Catherine to request her company, and she felt her stomach tighten slightly at the thought of being brought under the woman’s scrutiny.

“She does, indeed,” Mr. Collins said. “Mrs. Brandon has made her aware of your visits to Rosings and she would like to speak to you about Miss de Bourgh’s condition.”

“Certainly,” Elizabeth murmured. She did not like to think of what Mrs. Brandon might have said about her presence at Rosings Park, or if she had made mention of abandoning her to the elements to wait for a carriage that would never arrive.

“I met Mr. Darcy on the road,” she said as the carriage approached the house. “Do you know how long he will be staying at Rosings Park?”

Mr. Collins shifted uncomfortably in his seat before forcing a smile onto his face. “Ah yes, Mr. Darcy. Her Ladyship did not mention that he would be arriving so soon. I daresay he will be staying on through to Twelfth Night.”

“So long,” Elizabeth murmured. Mr. Collins did not seem enthusiastic about the presence of Lady Catherine’s nephew in the house, and she wondered why. The parson had been practically alight with joy to see Mr. Darcy in Hertfordshire, why had his enthusiasm dimmed so quickly?

Had Mr. Darcy discovered the parson and his aunt together as Anne had?

She narrowed her eyes at her cousin, but Mr. Collins looked quickly out the carriage window and did not say anything more.

As the carriage pulled up to the door, Mr. Collins fumbled with his books and a scrap of paper fell out onto the floor of the carriage. He did not seem to notice it, and Elizabeth did not say anything. When the driver opened the carriage door, Elizabeth

smiled sweetly and insisted that he exit the carriage first. Mr. Collins did so, and Elizabeth bent quickly to retrieve the piece of paper. She thrust it into a pocket in her cloak and then accepted the driver's hand to assist her in stepping down onto the snow-covered gravel.

Mr. Collins waited impatiently at the door, and Elizabeth resisted the urge to hurry. She did not mind if Lady Catherine was watching the clock for their arrival. She would see Anne first, and then brave the company of her mother.

"Come now, Cousin, we must not keep her Ladyship waiting," Mr. Collins said.

The front door opened to reveal the stern face of the butler, and Mr. Collins smiled broadly, all trace of irritation gone from his expression.

"Ah, Mr. Chester, good day to you," he said.

The butler muttered a greeting in reply and opened the door wider to accommodate the parson's entry to the house. Elizabeth trailed behind and ignored the butler's suspicious glare. She was an invited guest, and he had no business treating her as though she did not belong here.

"Mr. Chester, will you take Miss Bennet to Miss de Bourgh? She is expected," Mr. Collins said.

Elizabeth was startled by the ease with which Mr. Collins gave his instruction, and that the butler nodded shortly. She had expected the dour man to make some kind of argument or pronouncement, but to have him say nothing was very strange, indeed. Mr. Collins was not the master here...

Or was he?

The trio paused at a doorway, which Mr. Chester opened. "Her Ladyship is waiting for you in the drawing room," he said to Mr. Collins. "Miss Bennet, if you please."

Elizabeth murmured her thanks and entered the room while Mr. Collins continued down the corridor at a quick pace. He seemed to know where every room in the house was located and

Elizabeth was once again suspicious of his comfort within the walls of Rosings Park.

Anne de Bourgh was seated beside the fire, she was swathed in blankets and furs once more and her eyes were closed. "Anne?" Elizabeth said softly.

She stirred slightly and opened her eyes, and a weak smile crossed her pale lips as she saw Elizabeth approaching.

"Ah, Miss Elizabeth, how nice of you to come so soon," she said.

"Of course, I was very worried for you,"

A pale hand emerged from the blankets and waved Elizabeth toward a chair. "There is nothing to be worried for. I am just exhausted. Dr. Mull says that I have a delicate constitution and has prescribed vegetable and bone broths to keep my strength up, but they taste terrible and mother has been quite displeased about the changes made to her meal planning."

Elizabeth was somewhat comforted that a doctor had finally agreed to change Anne's diet. It was clear that the food she was eating was not agreeing with her stomach—and in fact, was the likely culprit behind all of her discomfort and illness. "Has your malady eased somewhat with the change?" Elizabeth asked.

Anne nodded. "It has, though I feel weaker, I am no longer ill at mealtimes."

"Good. I am glad to hear it." But more than that, Elizabeth was relieved to know that there was something changing in the kitchens. "I am certain that Mrs. Allen must be very busy with the preparations for Christmas," she said.

"Oh, indeed," Anne said. "In fact, Mother has sent her to London to take some instruction from one of her acquaintances... a very famous French cook has just come to work in London, and all of the great ladies have sent their cook to learn from her."

"I see," Elizabeth said.

"Mother has been very cross with the kitchen staff in Mrs. Allen's absence," she said with a small smile. "It seems that she is

not pleased with anything that has been produced since her departure, and though it was her own idea to send Mrs. Allen away, it seems that she was not prepared for any of the consequences of such an action.”

Anne laughed weakly and then coughed into her hand, and Elizabeth smiled. She was not surprised to hear of Lady Catherine’s disappointment. Her Ladyship seemed not to be able to comprehend any sort of repercussion for her own actions.

“How very thrilling. When will she return?” Elizabeth asked.

Anne sighed heavily. “In a week’s time, I suppose. I only hope that I am well enough to enjoy Christmas dinner. I do not relish the thought of eating a thin broth whilst everyone else is enjoying a roast turkey and my favorite desserts.”

“No, indeed,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “I am certain that you will be well enough by then that it will not be necessary.”

“Let us hope so.”

“I met Mr. Darcy on my last visit,” Elizabeth said conversationally. “He has come here on your mother’s invitation?”

Anne sighed heavily. “Indeed he has. Mother has spoken far too often of arranging a marriage between us, but I do not think that he would be agreeable to it.”

“Marriage? To Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth did her best to keep her expression neutral. Such a union seemed laughable at best, and she could not imagine that it would be a happy marriage. “Would such a thing be agreeable to *you*?”

“Pemberley is a beautiful estate,” Anne replied quickly. “And Derbyshire is in entirely the opposite direction from Rosings Park, which would suit me very well. Though I believe it is too far from London to be an enjoyable location...”

“Indeed.”

“I do not know that I could be the mistress of a country estate,” she said. “I do not believe I have the correct constitution for it. You, however, would be very well suited to a country life. You live in the country now!”

“If only that were the only requirement to be the wife of a country gentleman,” Elizabeth laughed. She had had the opportunity to consider such a proposal once, but Mr. Darcy had offered it in such a way as to make a lifetime as his companion seem unbearable. Regardless of the beauty of any estate, she could not tolerate his disagreeable personality. Some things did not change with time, and her dislike of him had only grown since then.

They took tea together, and said nothing more of Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth gifted Anne with a new pouch of mixed herbs, but it was not long before Anne began to look tired, and Elizabeth felt guilty for staying so long.

Anne sighed heavily. “I do apologize, Miss Elizabeth, but I am not quite feeling myself this afternoon.”

Elizabeth smiled. “There is no need to apologize,” she said. “I shall not tire you further. Rest and recover. It will be Christmastide very soon, and your mother would want you feeling well enough to attend the supper she has planned.”

Anne grimaced slightly. “I am quite certain that I will never be forgiven if I am not well enough to eat everything that is placed before me. And if I disgrace myself in front of my cousin, I shall never be forgiven for that, either.”

“Does your mother still wish to arrange a marriage between yourself and Mr. Darcy?”

“Whatever she has decided, she has certainly not informed me of her plans,” Anne replied stiffly. “I doubt that I would be permitted to give an opinion, regardless.”

Elizabeth felt strangely sour at the notion of Anne and Mr. Darcy becoming engaged. Engagements in wealthy families were difficult to break, and she could not imagine someone of Mr. Darcy’s society would be predisposed to negating such a contract.

Even if he did not love her, he would marry her, beget and heir, and go on with his life very much unchanged by the circumstance of marriage.

Elizabeth realised that she had not responded and she rose from her chair and forced a smile onto her face. "Well, be that as it may, I do hope that she would consider your own happiness before making any such decisions."

"My mother does not care about my happiness," Anne said. Her tone was devoid of anger, and Elizabeth realized that her new friend had resigned herself to whatever might happen. Perhaps that was something that high-born women must endure— Though she was certain that Mrs. Bennet would welcome such an arrangement, the inability to make her own choices would have driven Elizabeth mad.

"I care about your happiness," Elizabeth said. She poured Anne another cup of herbal tea and patted her hand gently. "I shall leave you to rest. Write to me when you would like company and I will be pleased to come to Rosings to see you."

Anne smiled weakly. "Thank you," she said. "You are a very good friend. I had not expected— But it is lovely."

Elizabeth wondered what Anne had been about to say, but she had little doubt that it would have been a statement that related to her social position, or some such other observation that would have been unintentionally insulting.

"I am happy you feel that way," Elizabeth said. "I shall see you again soon."

"Indeed."

Elizabeth left the room and walked down the corridor without quite knowing which direction she should go. The corridors of Rosings were strangely quiet, and Elizabeth felt somewhat uneasy about being alone in the big house. She was accustomed to seeing maids, footmen, and other servants rushing about the house at all hours, and the silence was overpowering.

She slowed her pace and listened for the sound of voices. If she could locate Lady Catherine and Mr. Collins, perhaps she could convince him to leave the house, or at the very least to order her a carriage so that she might return to the parsonage.

She passed a door and paused as she heard Mr. Collins' familiar exclamation of enthusiasm. She remembered briefly the secret tryst that Anne had said that she had interrupted.

If she were able to discover them together, speaking inappropriately, or sharing an embrace, it might be enough for Charlotte to consider an annulment.

Perhaps she could listen to what they were talking about. If it was nothing, she would knock on the door and join their conversation. And though she thought of such an action filled her with dread, Elizabeth leaned closer and pressed her ear against the polished wood.

Lady Catherine's laughter filled Elizabeth's ears and she cringed at the high, girlish sound. That was not how a woman of her Ladyship's advanced years laughed. And then Elizabeth remembered that, in the time she had known her, she had never heard Lady Catherine de Bourgh laugh at anything.

Intrigued, Elizabeth pressed her ear tightly to the door, but the sounds were too muffled, swallowed up by the wood of the door. She could hear the vibration of their speech, but the sound was too indistinct.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet," a voice said dryly.

Elizabeth straightened quickly and pushed away from the door. She whirled to face the gentleman who had surprised her and crossed her arms over her chest angrily.

"Mr. Darcy," she exclaimed. "I did not think to see you here."

"It is *you* I did not think to see here," he said. "Whatever are you doing?"

Elizabeth froze in place. She had to explain herself, but how

could she do such a thing without giving away the fact that she had been listening at keyholes like a disobedient child who had been sent to bed without her pudding.

Mr. Darcy, however, seemed to already know what she had been doing, and his expression was one of amusement, which only made Elizabeth nervous.

"I— I was looking for Mr. Collins," she said quickly. "I have just left Miss de Bourgh to rest... Mr. Chester directed him to the drawing room, and I cannot recall where it might be."

The gentleman's eyebrow twitched slightly. "The drawing room."

"Yes, the drawing room."

"Which one?"

Elizabeth paused. *Of course there was more than one drawing room at Rosings Park.*

"I—"

"You have found the correct door," Mr. Darcy said. "However, unless you are able to specify which drawing room you are looking for, I fear that you may be disappointed."

Elizabeth was growing frustrated now. He was certainly teasing her.

"But you know that this is the room you were searching for do you not?" he continued.

Elizabeth opened her mouth to reply, but found that she did not have the words to do so.

“Listening at doors was a pastime that I became quite adept at when I was a boy,” he said in a low voice. “However, one must be careful not to be discovered, else one might not be prepared for the consequences of such an action.”

Consequences.

Elizabeth had not thought of any consequences besides what she would do with the information once she had discovered it.

“What would you do, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, if I were to mention to my aunt that I found you here at the door, listening to private conversation between her Ladyship and her guest?”

Panic shot through Elizabeth’s veins. “Please,” she whispered. “You must not say anything. I was not... that is, I did not intend—”

“You did not intend to be caught? Indeed, no one does.”

Elizabeth frowned briefly. “That is hardly... Please, Mr. Darcy, I beg you, do not say anything to Lady Catherine. I can assure you that my intentions were innocent.”

They were not, but Elizabeth could not run the risk of the gentleman giving away her suspicions. It was enough that her Ladyship was curious about her friendship with Anne, she did not need any more questions—

Mr. Darcy did not reply, and Elizabeth’s tongue froze to the roof of her mouth as Mr. Darcy knocked gently upon the door, turned to favor her with a quick smile, and then opened the door.

Elizabeth bit back a gasp, not knowing what would be revealed, but there was nothing untoward happening in the drawing room. Mr. Collins stood at the fireplace, his cheeks were slightly reddened and he would not meet Mr. Darcy’s gaze. Lady Catherine was seated upon a large couch that had been upholstered in dark green velvet. Her expression was one of annoyed surprise at being interrupted, and Elizabeth wondered what they had been speaking about.

An untouched tray of tarts and a pot of tea sat on a small table

in front of the couch, and Elizabeth wondered where the serving girl who usually stayed to pour her Ladyship's tea had gone. Lady Catherine was never alone in a room, and there was always someone close by should she require anything. Very curious, indeed.

"What is it?" her Ladyship snapped.

Mr. Darcy made a short bow. "I have found Miss Bennet wandering the corridors," he said. "It seems that Mr. Chester did not give her the correct directions to find you when she had finished her visit with my dear cousin."

"Indeed," Lady Catherine said stiffly. She looked to Elizabeth, and she sensed some disdain in her Ladyship's appraising gaze. "Has my daughter sent you away, Miss Bennet?"

"She was exhausted and I thought she would benefit from some sleep," Elizabeth said haltingly.

"Sleep. That girl sleeps entirely too much," Lady Catherine huffed. "Terrible for the complexion, you know. Too much time spent indoors shuttered away from the sunshine is terrible for the humors. Do you not agree, Mr. Collins?"

"Indeed, I do, Ma'am," Mr. Collins replied quickly. Elizabeth bit her lip to keep from rolling her eyes at his response. Whatever they had interrupted, nothing would alter the parson's fawning worship of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

"What is it that you want, Miss Bennet?" Lady Catherine asked sharply.

Elizabeth shook herself out of her frozen state. "I should like to return to the parsonage," she said. "Mrs. Collins asked me to return as soon as I was able."

Lady Catherine smiled thinly. "Ah yes. Dr. Gannet tells me that her pregnancy is progressing well."

It was a statement of fact more than a question, and Elizabeth murmured a reply as Mr. Collins launched into a tirade of praise for the accoucheur that her Ladyship had so generously engaged for the purpose of attending to Charlotte and her child.

Elizabeth glanced at Mr. Darcy, hoping that he would have made some decision as to whether or not he would give her away to his aunt, but he seemed, instead, to be concentrating on the examination of his well-manicured hands.

"I daresay, Fitzwilliam, you should keep Dr. Gannet's name close should you ever marry. He comes very highly recommended by many of my friends in London. His fees are considerable, but he is the second best accoucheur in all of England."

"The second best," Mr. Darcy said. "I shall certainly take note of him."

It was obvious to Elizabeth that the gentleman had no intention of any such thing, but Lady Catherine did not seem to notice the dryness of her nephew's response.

"Indeed, I shall be very disappointed if I discover that you have not taken my advice."

"Of course," Mr. Darcy replied.

"Miss Bennet, you must go and seek out Mr. Chester and he shall call a carriage to take you back to the parsonage," Lady Catherine said with a sigh. "Mr. Collins and I have much to discuss; you may tell Mrs. Collins."

"I shall," Elizabeth said. She curtsied briefly and fled from the room. She half-expected Mr. Darcy to follow her and continue his mocking banter, but she was relieved that he did not. Though Elizabeth could not guess what interest he might have had in Mr. Collins' discussions with his aunt.

She had not known what she had hoped to see when the gentleman had opened the drawing room door, but she found herself curiously disappointed that there had been nothing scandalous to be revealed. Mr. Collins' reddened cheeks could have been from the heat of the fire, or a particularly passionate discussion—but what could they have been discussing that would have been passionate? And what of the laughter she had heard through the door?

Elizabeth knew that she would not be satisfied with guesswork,

but she also was not certain that she wanted to know the truth. Rosings Park was large enough to contain many secrets, but she was not confident in her ability to discover them... or how best to bear that discovery.

As Elizabeth paused at a corner, unsure of which way to go, she heard footsteps in the corridor.

"I have my eye on you, girl," a voice said sharply. "Make no mistake, her Ladyship notices when things go missing."

"I haven't done anything wrong!"

Elizabeth peered around the corner carefully. Mrs. Brandon, Rosings Park's formidable housekeeper, loomed over one of the kitchen maids who stood nervously on the carpeted floor. Elizabeth did not recognize the girl, but she recognized her stance well enough. Her shoulders were hunched and she did not look up at the woman who berated her.

Mrs. Brandon's expression was stern, and the keys at her ample waist glittered in the afternoon sunlight that streamed through the high windows. She stabbed a finger into the girl's shoulder. "You might think you've been careful, but I run a firm household here, little miss, and if you put one foot out of place, I will know about it."

The girl murmured something that Elizabeth could not hear, and it was clear that Mrs. Brandon was not satisfied with her answer.

"Speak up, girl. If it was not you, then give me a name and you will escape punishment. Do not think that Mr. Chester enjoys beating the maids, but if it must be done—"

"I did nothin'!" the girl said vehemently. "Mrs. Allen brought me on for Christmastide. I don't know anythin' about things goin' missin'. I don't even leave the kitchen unless she tells me to!"

"A likely story," Mrs. Brandon snapped.

"You'll have to speak to Mrs. Allen," the girl said desperately. "I promise I don't know anythin'!"

Mrs. Brandon's eyes narrowed at the mention of the cook's

name. "Mrs. Allen should not have hired you," the housekeeper snapped. "We shall see if you are telling the truth. Watch your steps, girl." Her voice was dark and dangerous, and Elizabeth's fingers tightened on the wall as the housekeeper strode away down the corridor. The kitchen maid pressed her hands against her cheeks and fled in the opposite direction. She ran past Elizabeth, but did not notice her, or stop until she reached the stairs that led down to the kitchens.

Elizabeth took a breath and pushed away from the wall. Whatever was happening below stairs, it was clear that Mrs. Brandon and Mr. Chester ruled Rosings Parks with iron hands. Did they really beat their servants when they disobeyed orders or broke the rules? How barbaric. She had heard of such things, but only in whispers.

She looked at the stairs and wondered if the kitchen maid would be running to Mrs. Allen to tell her of what had happened. Elizabeth knew that she should have resumed her search for Mr. Chester, but her curiosity had been piqued, and she wanted to know more of what was happening behind the walls of Rosings Park.

She checked the corridor to be certain that she was alone and then walked quickly to the stairs. She took a deep breath and then followed in the maid's footsteps.

Elizabeth crept down the stairs and stayed pressed

against the wall to keep from being seen. It was darker in the lower halls of the servant's quarters and warmer because of the great bread ovens.

"Ah, Mrs. Allen, I see you have returned from your time in London." Mrs. Brandon's voice echoed in the corridor and Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat.

"I have, indeed," the cook replied sweetly.

Elizabeth could see the kitchen maid standing in the corridor. Her hands were clasped in front of her and she looked down at her shoes. Mrs. Brandon stood in the doorway of Mrs. Allen's room with her hands placed upon her wide hips as she confronted the cook.

"You have been hiring kitchen girls without my permission," the housekeeper said sharply.

"I do not have time to ask your permission," Mrs. Allen replied. Her voice was calm and conversational, and though Elizabeth could not see her face, she imagined that the cook was smiling as she spoke to the angry housekeeper. Great houses were managed by three people: The housekeeper, the butler, and the cook. They would usually work in concert and a seamless working relationship made for a smoothly run house. But it was abundantly clear that Mrs. Brandon and Mrs. Allen did not see eye to eye.

"My permission is her Ladyship's permission," Mrs. Brandon

snapped. "You would do well to seek it in the future. And you should also know that your maids are taking liberties."

"Liberties?" Mrs. Allen asked.

"Indeed! I have seen them in the corridors, loitering at doorways and speaking to members of the household. Kitchen maids are like mice. If they can be seen in a great house, then there is a problem. In this case, it is a problem with their management."

"Management."

"Indeed. You have allowed this kitchen to spiral out of control!"

Elizabeth took a quick breath and pressed herself against the wall as the kitchen maid looked up. Her eyes widened as she saw Elizabeth, but Elizabeth held a finger to her lips to beg the girl to stay silent. She nodded briefly and then looked down at her feet once more.

"A spiral, you say," Mrs. Allen said calmly. "I do not think so."

"The costs for the kitchen's needs are well beyond what they should be," Mrs. Brandon said. Her voice had become somewhat shrill, and Elizabeth imagined that it was because Mrs. Allen refused to become enraged or raise her own voice with her.

"Perhaps that is because the woman who worked here before took poor advice from someone who did not know how a kitchen should be managed," Mrs. Allen said.

Mrs. Brandon's spine straightened, but she did not reply.

"This kitchen's costs will be high until I can bring the quality of the food, and the people who make it, under better control. Her Ladyship, herself, has complimented me personally on the preparation of her meals."

"And what of Miss de Bourgh's illness?" Mrs. Brandon demanded.

Elizabeth's eyes widened. *Was it possible that the housekeeper was not involved in Anne's malady?*

"The poor lamb," Mrs. Allen said sadly. "I am so very perplexed by it."

"Were you not given instruction to change her diet?"

"I was, indeed. The doctors were very helpful."

"And yet there is no change."

Mrs. Allen was quiet, and Elizabeth could only guess that her response had been a wordless gesture instead of the reply that Mrs. Brandon had been expecting.

"And what of Margaret?"

"What of her?" Mrs. Allen asked.

"She was sent to the parsonage and—"

"Margaret was a good girl, but she had a sweet tooth," Mrs. Allen interrupted. "I had caught her sneaking pastries in the past and she had been beaten soundly for it, but I suppose she did not believe that there would be any repercussions for her actions if she did them while she was out of my sight. Alas, it seems that the contents of that particular pastry did not agree with poor Margaret's constitution. A pity, indeed."

"You have instructed Mr. Chester to discipline the kitchen maids?" Mrs. Brandon said angrily.

"Oh, no. I carry out all of my own punishments," Mrs. Allen said with a little laugh. "It is very rare that I have to discipline one of the girls a second time."

"I shall speak to her Ladyship about your costs," Mrs. Brandon said sharply.

"See that you do," Mrs. Allen replied. Her voice was saccharine sweet and Elizabeth shivered a little at the sound of it. Mrs. Brandon might have been on the attack, but Mrs. Allen seemed strong enough to hold her own ground. "Now, if you will excuse me, it is almost time for supper to be served."

The kitchen maid looked at Elizabeth again and gestured wildly for her to leave. Elizabeth nodded her thanks and crept back up the stairs toward the upper floors. Her presence in the servant's quarters would have been impossible to explain, and she was grateful to the maid for her warning.

It was not until she felt the chill of the air in the main floor corridor on her skin that Elizabeth was able to breathe a small sigh

of relief. She had not known that the hour was so late, she needed to return to the parsonage as soon as possible. Charlotte would be growing worried.

“Skulking around corners again, Miss Bennet?” a voice said from behind her.

Elizabeth smothered a yelp of surprise and then her eyes narrowed as she saw Mr. Darcy striding down the corridor toward her. “Mr. Darcy.”

“I had assumed you had departed Rosings already,” he said.

“I— I could not find Mr. Chester,” she said hastily.

The gentleman’s eyebrow rose again and Elizabeth found herself hating the fact that he carried some knowledge of how to embarrass her. And now to have found her in a similar situation... Entirely disagreeable.

“A pity, but it is too late to leave now,” he said. “Her Ladyship will be furious if you leave before supper.”

“Supper— But Charlotte...”

“Mrs. Collins will be well taken care of, I have no doubt,” he said. “Come along, Miss Bennet, her Ladyship will want to know why you are still in her house after begging so prettily to be released from it.”

“I did not beg,” Elizabeth said through gritted teeth.

“As you say.”

Mr. Darcy turned away and walked down the corridor, and Elizabeth rushed to catch up with his long strides.

“Why are you here, Mr. Darcy,” she asked breathlessly.

“As I have already told you, I am here at my aunt’s invitation.”

“Surely a gentleman would enjoy spending Christmastide at his own estate,” she said.

Mr. Darcy inclined his head slightly. “Under ordinary circumstance, I would. Or I would pass the time in London. However, this year has been especially difficult.”

“Has it.”

“Indeed. I am not so welcome in London as I have been in other

years.”

“And why might that be?” Elizabeth asked. She had not meant to be so bold in her questions, but it had slipped out before she could stop herself. Could Mr. Bingley have discovered his friend’s role in their departure from Hertfordshire? Surely, that could be the explanation... Or, perhaps, one of many.

“Cousin!” Mr. Collins’ shout of surprise echoed in the wide corridor, and Elizabeth felt her stomach drop as the parson and Lady Catherine turned the corner together. Her Ladyship’s hand was upon Mr. Collins’ arm, and Elizabeth noticed that Mr. Darcy stiffened slightly as he realized the same.

“Miss Bennet,” Lady Catherine said stiffly. “I did not think to see you here.”

“She could not find Mr. Chester,” Mr. Darcy said before Elizabeth could reply.

Lady Catherine’s pinched expression was unbecoming, but it was clear that no one had informed her of that fact. “I see. Well, as you are still here, you will stay for supper.”

Elizabeth nodded and thanked her quietly. Mr. Collins smiled broadly and Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy fell into step behind his aunt as they made their way to the dining room.

Elizabeth had had no intention of joining such a meal, and now she regretted her own curiosity. She could have been safely settled at the parsonage talking to Charlotte about her tea with Anne de Bourgh... but now she would have to suffer through a meal with no agreeable company to speak of, and a mind full of thoughts and confused questions that she could not quiet.

Supper was as awkward a meal as any Elizabeth had attended at the great house. There were several courses, and her Ladyship

ate quickly and sparingly. It did not help matters that as soon as she was finished with her plate, all plates at the table were swept away whether the diner was finished or not.

Anne sat across the table from Elizabeth, and spoke no more than a few words, and only when prompted by her mother. She looked ill and exhausted, pale in the candlelight. Elizabeth had hoped that she would be feeling stronger as Christmas approached, but it did not seem as though she would be well enough to enjoy the season at all—and Elizabeth could not help but worry that her new friend might not live to see the new year or twelfth night at all.

The main course was brought into the room by footmen, and followed by Mrs. Allen who carried a tray of dressings that could be applied to the extravagant dish.

As the meat was carved and served, conversation turned to the festivities that would be enjoyed at Rosings Park. Mr. Darcy, in particular, seemed passionately interested in the topic.

“I wonder, Aunt, if there will be an opportunity for a winter hunt,” he said.

Lady Catherine looked at him with an indulgent interest and then smiled. “I do not see why there should not be. There has not been a winter shoot at Rosings Park for quite some years.”

She looked to Mrs. Brandon who nodded enthusiastically. “Indeed, Ma’am. I am certain that Mr. Nocks would be exceedingly pleased by it.”

“You shall speak to the gamekeeper about it,” Lady Catherine said. “But I leave all of the preparations to you, Fitzwilliam.”

“I thank you,” he said with a rare smile. “I shall be certain that it surpasses all other winter hunts that have occurred at Rosings Park.”

“My late husband would so have enjoyed a shoot,” Lady Catherine said wistfully. “Henry was overly fond of shooting, and I believe the gamekeeper was one of his closest companions—”

The cook was standing by the table, waiting for her Ladyship to

choose a sauce for her meat when Elizabeth saw her expression change. At the mention of the hunt, her smile began to waver, and the slight rattle of silver on the tray as her hands began to shake.

“Mrs. Allen,” she said, “are you quite well?”

But her words were drowned out by Mr. Collins who launched into an enthusiastic speech on the lordly virtues of hunting.

Mrs. Allen turned from the table before Lady Catherine could select her sauce, and she let out a cry of indignation as the spoon was pulled from her grasp. The cook crashed into one of the footmen, and the tray the young man was holding spiralled out of his hands and fell upon the carpet with a horrifying clatter. Mrs. Allen’s tray tilted and the silver decanters and gravy boats it had held all slid to the floor and spattered the fine carpet with their contents.

The dining room erupted into chaos as maids and footmen dashed in to gather the fallen food and clean the mess from the carpet. Lady Catherine complained loudly and bitterly as Mrs. Brandon did her best to keep the situation under control. Elizabeth watched all of it with wide eyes, unable to decide what had happened or why it had occurred.

Mrs. Allen stood to the side, her apron splattered with food and brightly colored sauces until she was ushered away by one of the maids and the footmen were left to clean up the mess as best they could.

With supper utterly ruined, Mrs. Brandon suggested that the party be moved into the parlor to take dessert and coffee. Lady Catherine would not be calmed and continued to berate the housekeeper for the accident until she was brought coffee and a small, ornately decorated plum pudding was wheeled into the room. When the pudding was doused with brandy and set alight, her Ladyship finally smiled once more, and it seemed that the

events of the evening could be forgotten.

Mr. Darcy, however, could not be distracted from the shoot.

“How long has it been since there has been a shoot at Rosings,” he asked. “I daresay I cannot remember the last one.”

Lady Catherine sighed heavily. “It has been quite some years,” she said. “My poor Henry would not hear of having another shoot after it...”

“What happened?” Elizabeth asked. Against her will, she was curious.

“The gamekeeper was killed,” her Ladyship said casually as though she were speaking of a summer picnic. “It was an awful thing, we did not speak of it for years. The man had no family, of course, so it was not as terrible as it could have been, but my Henry was quite upset about it for some years.”

Lady Catherine seemed very detached from the subject that was being discussed, and Elizabeth could not determine whether it was because she did not care, or that she had been entirely removed from it and had not questioned the death any further. Either way, Elizabeth was stunned at her Ladyship’s reaction and subsequent retelling of the story. Her own father would have been devastated by such an event.

“But what happened?” Elizabeth asked again.

Lady Catherine waved her spoon at Elizabeth and then stabbed it into her pudding. “Henry would not tell me anything specific. Just that the man was injured on the shoot, and died of his injuries. A terrible accident. It was all very regrettable.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth murmured.

“But Henry did not shoot again. The new gamekeeper was left to his own devices, and I daresay we are overdue for a brace of pheasants upon this table.”

There were murmurs of agreement from around the room, but Elizabeth pushed her spoon into her pudding thoughtfully. What must have happened to have made Lord de Bourgh give up his favorite pastime? It could not have been something as simple as an

accident. Lady Catherine had mentioned that her husband and the gamekeeper were very close—perhaps there was something more to it.

Elizabeth returned to the parsonage with Mr. Collins and

stayed in the parlor to sit with Charlotte as he exchanged a few pleasantries and then retired to his study. Elizabeth was exhausted by the events of the day, but she did her best to report them all dutifully to Charlotte, as well as apologizing for her long absence.

“I did not think to stay for supper,” she said. “I am sorry that you were left alone for so many hours.”

Charlotte shook her head and sipped her tea. “It is no matter,” she said. “The new kitchen maid is very quiet, but she is a much better cook than Alice or Margaret, so it was not a terrible thing.”

“Lady Catherine sent down the remainder of the pudding for you,” Elizabeth said. “I wish you could have been there to see the accident for I do not feel as though I could describe it with any accuracy that would do it justice—”

“Poor Mrs. Allen,” Charlotte said. “I cannot help but wonder what might have brought on such an episode.”

Elizabeth shook her head. It had confused her as well. And she had also noticed the hard look of triumph that had glittered in Mrs. Brandon’s eyes to see her colleague brought low in front of her Ladyship.

“I imagine that Lady Catherine did not take kindly to such an event.”

“No, indeed,” Elizabeth said. “Mr. Darcy seems quite set upon arranging for a winter shoot. Will Mr. Collins partake?”

Charlotte laughed softly and then pressed her fingers to her lips. "I should think not. He would, no doubt, like to be part of such a thing, but he is a terrible shot, and I believe he is frightened of the pheasants."

"Frightened of the pheasants..."

"The way they spring up from the ground," Charlotte laughed. "I believe it startles him too much, and he does not enjoy it."

Elizabeth pressed the back of her hand to her mouth to keep from laughing, but the image in her mind of the parson jumping back in fright as the pheasants flew up from the underbrush was too comical to ignore.

The two women laughed together for a moment and then Elizabeth remembered what Lady Catherine had said about the death of the gamekeeper and her laughter died away.

"Do you think that the gamekeeper would speak with me?" Elizabeth wondered aloud.

Charlotte's eyes widened slightly. "I do not see why he would not," she said. "He does seem to be a kind man. I am certain he would be happy to speak with you. But why should you wish to do something like that?"

Elizabeth nodded and stirred the tea that Charlotte poured for her. "I wonder if he would be able, or willing, to tell me about the man who held the position before him."

"From what I know of Mr. Nocks, he would be happy of the company. I do not believe that Lady Catherine has much interest in the game that populates the woods that surround Rosings Park."

"I would agree with you," Elizabeth said ruefully. "I should not know what to do if I were the mistress of a great house... there are far too many cares. Too many people to watch out for... too many lives dependant on your good management. I should not like that at all."

"Perhaps it is something that one grows used to over time," Charlotte mused. "I have only a small household, but it has become easier to manage with every passing day." She frowned slightly.

“Although I do not know what will become of that management once my child is born.”

“I suspect that it will become more difficult, but if anyone were able to manage it, I believe that it would be a task that you will take to with all success.”

Charlotte smiled and rubbed a hand over her belly. “Let us hope so.”

“I do not need to hope,” Elizabeth said with a laugh. “It is a certainty.”

Charlotte sighed heavily. “It is very late, will you help me up the stairs? I begin to wonder if I should move my bedchamber down to the main floor. Dr. Gannet believes that the stairs will do me a benefit, but every day they become more difficult to manage.”

“Dr. Gannet does know best, I suppose,” Elizabeth said. She rose from her chair and offered Charlotte her arm. “Come now, I shall haul you up the stairs and help you into bed.”

Charlotte made a face at her friend and then took hold of her hand. “You are not helping.”

She leaned on Elizabeth’s arm and they walked together through the house and up the stairs. Mr. Collins’ study door was closed, and while Elizabeth felt some regret for her friend’s disquiet at her husband’s absence, she was grateful that the parson had shut himself away after only a brief visit to tell Charlotte of the grandeur of the supper and pass along Lady Catherine’s advice for the final weeks of Charlotte’s pregnancy.

Perhaps it was a mercy that he was so distracted by the approaching Christmas celebrations. Charlotte would be thankful for his absence after the child’s birth, but for now, Elizabeth only hoped that she would be able to find some solace in it. It would be a very long time before she would have any private time after the child was born.

After she had tucked Charlotte into her bed, Elizabeth returned to her own bedchamber and wrote a letter to Jane. She knew what

she wanted to do, but she would have to find the courage to do it first.

In the morning, Elizabeth resolved to take a walk in the snow.

The weather had cleared, and the grey clouds that had hung over Hunsford had cleared, leaving only clear blue sky behind. Elizabeth knew that the day would be cold, but she could not waste any more time. She needed answers, and she was growing tired of the weight of the questions that she carried with her.

She opened the window and shuddered at the cold breeze that touched her cheeks. An extra layer of woollen stockings would be required. That much was certain. And a heavier cloak.

Elizabeth smiled and rang the bell for the maid. The girl that Mrs. Allen had sent down from Rosings Park was very quiet as Charlotte had said, but she was also very punctual and always came immediately after the bells were rung in the morning. She brought tea and washing water, and Elizabeth sent her in search of some heavy boots for her to wear out into the snow.

Once she was dressed and ready to face the cold, Elizabeth's determination began to falter just a little. She wondered if she should have asked for an escort to the gamekeeper's cottage, or an introduction, but she did not know whom she should ask for such a thing, or how long it would take to acquire permission from her Ladyship to visit. It was better to beg forgiveness than ask permission, she reasoned, and would take less time to accomplish her task. Although, she was not yet certain of what might happen, especially if Mr. Nocks answered her questions...

If he did not, there would be nothing more to do, but if he *did*, her journey to the truth would become much more difficult.

Elizabeth fastened the cloak around her shoulders and stepped

into the boots that the kitchen maid had found for her. They were too large for her feet, but that did not matter as long as her toes were dry.

She took a deep breath and stepped out into the cold air. She walked over the freshly swept path and closed the parsonage gate behind herself. Charlotte waved from her bedchamber window and Elizabeth smiled up at her. If she had not been pregnant and under Dr. Gannet's orders to stay indoors, Charlotte would certainly have braved the cold with her.

She walked with some determination through the snow, and hoped that she was walking in the right direction. She had a faint idea of where the gamekeeper's cottage might be, but she was not certain of its precise location. She came to the edge of the woods that surrounded Rosings Park and took a deep breath before stepping into the trees. The snow was thinner beneath the evergreen branches, and the dim sunlight was filtered even further by the thick branches.

Distracted with thoughts of the happenings at Rosings Park, Elizabeth stepped over fallen branches and protruding roots, hoping that she was taking the correct path through the trees.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet?"

Elizabeth gasped aloud at the sound of a man's voice, and she drew back in surprise. "Mr. Darcy?"

"How is it that I startle you so," he said with a small smile.

"You are following me," Elizabeth accused him.

"Following you?" he laughed. "I am on my way to visit with Mr. Nocks."

Elizabeth blinked at him. "As am I," she said.

Mr. Darcy's eyebrow rose. "And what business might a young lady have with the gamekeeper at Rosings Park?" he asked.

"I—I have questions for him," she said boldly.

"Indeed."

"Quite so."

Her hands clenched into fists and she glared at him, daring the

gentleman to say anything against her. But instead of an argument, Mr. Darcy laughed and shook his head.

“Might I escort you to the gamekeeper’s cottage?” he asked.

“I shall find my own way,” Elizabeth said firmly.

“You are heading in the wrong direction,” he said.

“I—”

“Come along, Miss Bennet. If you will allow me to escort you to see Mr. Nocks then you will not become lost in the woods. It would be ill-mannered of me, indeed, to abandon you to your pride in the depths of the woods.”

“How dare—”

“Come along.”

Mr. Darcy began to walk once more, and Elizabeth felt the cold hand of panic slip up her spine. If he left her to walk alone, she risked becoming lost. She had not thought of that fact until the gentleman had mentioned it, but now she was very conscious of the fact that she did not know where she was going.

She jumped over a large root and hurried after Mr. Darcy. She was almost out of breath as she caught up with his long stride. “Why are you visiting the gamekeeper,” she asked.

“The winter shooting party. I have already sent out letters to my friends, Mr. Nocks will be hard pressed to keep up if he is not advised that such an event will be happening.”

“But so close to Christmastide,” she said.

“No better way to furnish the Christmas table,” he said.

“I suppose,” Elizabeth muttered. She wondered who might receive an invitation to the shooting party, but she did not ask. The faint hope that Mr. Bingley might be among the gentlemen who might appear at Rosings Park sparked in her mind, and she resolved to speak to him if he did come. Perhaps she would be able to convince him to return to Hertfordshire...

“And why should you like to speak to the gamekeeper?” he asked.

“I— I thought to ask him about his predecessor,” she said.

“The former gamekeeper? But why?”

“I should like to know more about the accident that caused his death,” Elizabeth said firmly. “It seemed to have had a great effect on the household, and I should like to know more.”

“Curiosity... Another quality I did not know you possessed,” he said.

Elizabeth lifted her chin. “It is not merely curiosity or gossip,” Elizabeth said. “I am concerned for Mrs. Allen. She seemed most affected by the mention of it.”

Mr. Darcy looked at her strangely. “And what do you care how the cook has been affected by something that does not concern her?”

“Why should I not care?” Elizabeth asked. “The poor woman seemed quite overwhelmed by it.”

“And what do you hope to learn from this outing?” the gentleman asked.

“I am not certain,” Elizabeth said truthfully. “I simply wish to understand what happened. Her Ladyship did not seem familiar with the details of the event, and I should like to think that if such a thing were to happen upon my estate that I would want to know every detail.”

“Quite so,” Mr. Darcy murmured.

They walked on in silence, and then, as they rounded another bend in the path Elizabeth let out a small cry of surprise as a small cottage came into view. Smoke billowed merrily from the chimney, and Elizabeth smiled at the red-painted shutters that made the whole structure seem more cheerful and homely.

A small stable nestled against the back wall of the cottage and she heard the whinny of the horse that was kept inside.

The front door opened and the gamekeeper emerged from the cottage. He lifted his hand in greeting and Elizabeth waved in response.

“Mr. Nocks,” Mr. Darcy called out. “Might I have a moment of your time.”

“Of course, young master,” the gamekeeper replied with a ready smile. He then looked to Elizabeth quizzically. “Hello, Miss...”

“This is Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy said quickly. “She has... some questions for you.”

The gamekeeper’s eyes twinkled merrily. “Oh, aye, I’ll happily answer what I can.”

Elizabeth glanced at Mr. Darcy, but he gestured for her to continue. He seemed more amused by her presence than anything and she found herself growing more irritated by his presence with every passing moment.

“Mr. Nocks, I wonder if you might answer a question of some... sensitivity,” she began.

“I’m not very good with sensitive things, Miss Bennet,” the gamekeeper chuckled, “but I will try.”

Elizabeth smiled. “It is regarding your predecessor...”

“Mr. Greymouth,” he said. “Yes, indeed. A terrible tragedy, his passin’ was.”

“How did it happen?” she asked.

Mr. Nocks looked to Mr. Darcy in question, and then back to Elizabeth. “It was an accident, Miss, nothin’ more. A mistake with the gun. The powder magazine had been overloaded and the weapon misfired. Mr. Greymouth was caught in the neck by the bullet... He did not have time to get out of range of his Lordship’s shot.”

Elizabeth shifted on her feet as the gamekeeper shook his head sadly. “But how...”

“I was not there, Miss,” Mr. Nocks said. “I was helpin’ another gentleman with his shootin’ irons. I heard the shot, and the shouts afterward, but I only know what I was told.”

“Were you working for his Lordship when the accident happened?” Mr. Darcy asked. Elizabeth looked at him in surprise and then back to Mr. Nocks who smiled briefly.

“I was, indeed, Sir. Mr. Greymouth was trainin’ me tae be his

replacement. Though I did not expect it to be so soon that I would be takin' up residence in this cottage."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about him?" Elizabeth asked. "Lady Catherine mentioned that he had no family—"

The old man shook his head. "No, indeed, Miss. That's not true. He had a daughter. A bonny little thing with bright eyes and a way with pastries. She was in service on the estate."

"In service," Elizabeth gasped. "But why—"

"In the kitchens, I'll warrant," Mr. Nocks continued. He chuckled to himself, no doubt remembering something. Elizabeth wondered if he would tell her, but the old man seemed to think better of it and instead he shook his head. "She would come down and visit the cottage every so often and bring us poor fellows some fancy treats left over from her Ladyship's tea services. I'll wager that she would have been in some measure of trouble if she were found out."

"How kind of her," Elizabeth said.

"A dutiful daughter," Mr. Darcy agreed.

"But what became of her after the accident? Why would her Ladyship say that Mr. Greymouth had no family?"

The gamekeeper shrugged. "It has been some years, Miss Bennet," he said. "I would wager that she left the household. She had no other family here..."

"I see."

Elizabeth thanked the man for his assistance and Mr. Darcy took his turn to speak to the gamekeeper about the winter shoot. The gamekeeper was enthusiastic about the gentleman's proposal. It had been more than fifteen years since Lord de Bourgh's death, and there had been no shooting parties at Rosings Park since the tragedy that had taken Mr. Greymouth's life. Twenty years was a very long time for a gamekeeper to count birds and deer for no reason.

When Mr. Darcy had finished his discussion with the gamekeeper, he escorted Elizabeth back to the edge of the trees.

“Did your questions yield the answers you wanted, Miss Bennet?” he asked.

“I am afraid that his answers only brought more questions,” she said softly. That was not entirely true, but Elizabeth was not about to tell the gentleman what she suspected was occurring inside the walls of Rosings Park.

Elizabeth's worry and doubt began to eat away at her.

Charlotte could tell that something was amiss, but Elizabeth was having difficulty putting her thoughts into words—and she did not know what approach she would have to take to discover what was truly happening. She had some idea, but she could not be certain if she was brave enough to undertake it.

What Mr. Nocks had said about the former gamekeeper had awakened some spark of an idea in her mind. But it was not Mr. Greymouth that held her attention, it was his daughter. A young woman working in the kitchens at Rosings Park who had a talent for pastry. But it could not be possible.

Elizabeth wrote to Anne de Bourgh to inquire after her health, but when she did not receive a reply, she joined Mr. Collins on his next visit to Rosings Park.

As he settled himself into the seat, Elizabeth hurried down the path and scrambled into the carriage without waiting for the assistance of the driver.

“Ah, cousin,” Mr. Collins exclaimed with some surprise. “I did not know you were coming to Rosings today.”

“Indeed, I am,” she said breathlessly. “Miss de Bourgh sent a message through the kitchen maid that she wished to see me.” The lie came easily and Elizabeth smiled at Mr. Collins who seemed to take her at her word.

“How nice,” he replied with a nervous smile. “Her Ladyship did

say that Miss de Bourgh was feeling stronger these last few days.”

“Indeed, I am glad to hear it,” Elizabeth said.

Mr. Collins’ smile was strained, and the remainder of the short carriage ride passed in silence and Elizabeth looked out the window and up at the big house. She would discover what was happening to Anne de Bourgh, and she would make it right.

Mr. Chester looked surprised, and somewhat dismayed to see Elizabeth’s face, but she smiled brightly at the dour butler. “Good morning, Mr. Chester,” she said as she stepped into the foyer.

“Good morning, Miss,” the butler replied stiffly.

“Please take Miss Bennet to see Miss de Bourgh,” Mr. Collins said with his usual bluster. “I trust her Ladyship awaits me in the parlor?”

“As you say, Sir,” the butler replied. He gestured in the direction of the parlor and Mr. Collins bowed shortly to Elizabeth and marched away toward his patroness.

“Miss de Bourgh is in her bedchamber.”

“Thank you, Mr. Chester, I am grateful for your escort,” Elizabeth said with a smile. The butler did not respond, and strode down the corridor. The man took long strides, and Elizabeth wondered if he was walking with more speed to keep ahead of her. She did her best to keep up, but it was an exertion to do so.

She marveled at the fact that she had been coming to Rosings Park for some weeks but still could not work out the layout of the house in her mind. Longbourn had been built in a simple rectangular pattern. Bedchambers on the second and third floors, parlor, study, and kitchens on the main floor... easy to remember. But Rosings Park’s sprawling design and complicated corridors made such things very difficult, indeed.

Some things were familiar; paintings and the pattern of the carpets helped a little, but other landmarks like flowers were changed so frequently that it was impossible to differentiate one corridor from the next. As an added frustration, Lady Catherine had ordered the Christmastide decorations to be set out over the

house, and everything smelled pleasantly of pine, cinnamon, and apples. However pleasant the smell might have been, the similarity of the design made everything all the more confusing.

Mr. Chester paused in front of a door that had been swagged with pine boughs wound with red ribbon and topped with gold-painted apples. "Miss de Bourgh may tire easily," he said.

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Mr. Chester," she replied. The butler's hand hesitated over the polished brass doorknob, but then he opened the door and allowed her to pass by. Anne de Bourgh was still abed, but Elizabeth was not surprised. The sudden sweet smell of sickness overwhelmed her for a moment, and she jumped a little when the butler closed the chamber door behind her.

"Anne?" she said hesitantly. "Anne, it is Elizabeth Bennet."

The figure under the bedclothes stirred and Anne's head emerged from beneath the blankets. "Is it late? Is mother angry with me for missing luncheon?"

Elizabeth rushed to the side of the bed and helped the young woman to sit up. "No, no. Not at all. It is still early. No one is cross with you."

Anne sighed, closed her eyes, and smiled weakly as Elizabeth pushed pillows behind her back to prop her up into a sitting position.

"You are very kind," she murmured.

"Nonsense," Elizabeth said softly. "You should have a maid come to look in on you."

"Mother has arranged for one, but I do not see her often."

"How are you feeling?" Elizabeth dreaded the answer to this question. Anne's complexion was pale and she appeared thinner, as though she were shrinking into herself.

"I am not well at all," Anne said. "Mother is very displeased with me. I shall be of no use to her at all."

Elizabeth made a derisive noise and pulled the blankets up higher on Anne's torso. "Shall I light the fire?" she asked. The room was warm, but Anne shivered under her blankets and she

nodded in response to Elizabeth's question.

She turned from the bed and went to the fire where embers still smoldered in a blanket of ash. She stoked the fire and re-lit it quickly before rising and pulling the bell cord to ring for tea.

"I have brought you more of that herbal remedy," she said. Anne brightened somewhat and Elizabeth took a chair by the fire so that she could tend it as the flames grew stronger.

Anne sighed heavily. "I do wish I were not so ill. I have been ill in the past with fevers and chills, but nothing like this. I am ever so exhausted. It would be easier to just go to sleep and never wake from it."

"Now, now, that is no kind of talk," Elizabeth said. "You shall be well again by the new year, and I will hear you say nothing to the contrary."

"Mrs. Collins will have her child soon," she said as though she had not heard Elizabeth's admonishment. "Would you ask her to consider naming it Anne if it is a girl?"

Elizabeth looked down at her hand and then back to Anne and smiled. "I shall," she promised. "I am not certain that a name has yet been chosen, and I do not see why she would not consider something so lovely."

Anne closed her eyes and smiled gently and Elizabeth wondered if she had fallen to sleep once more, but when the maid knocked gently upon the chamber door, her eyes flew open and a suspicious look came over her face.

Elizabeth did not recognize the maid who entered the room, but that was not a surprise. She carried a tray of tea and a plate of scones that had been spread with a bright berry preserve.

"Oh, Miss Anne," the girl exclaimed as she set down the tray. "I did not know you had a guest, I shall bring some more—"

Elizabeth pulled the tray forward before the girl could remove the plate of scones. "Do not trouble yourself," she said. "These look lovely."

The girl's eyes flickered between Elizabeth and the plate of

scones and then she smiled awkwardly and straightened. "As you say, Miss."

"You may go now, thank you," Elizabeth said brightly. "I shall ring if anything else is required."

The girl bobbed a curtsey and fled the room as quickly as she could without running. The chamber door closed with a sharp *click* and Elizabeth saw Anne flinch slightly at the noise.

"Some hot tea will set you right," Elizabeth said soothingly. She opened the pouch of herbs she had brought and set a few spoonfuls into the teapot to steep. As she re-tied the drawstring on the muslin bag that held the herbs, she examined the scones carefully. If something were wrong with Anne, it would be due to her diet. She had decided as much almost upon the first day of seeing Anne's condition.

She plucked one of the scones from its plate and looked at it closely. The pastry itself appeared normal, but it was the berry preserve that gave her pause. If anything were being added to Anne de Bourgh's food to keep her ill, she had to be suspicious of everything.

"Would you mind if I took some scones back to the parsonage for Mrs. Collins?" she asked. She hoped that Anne would not notice her scrutiny, and when the young woman nodded Elizabeth breathed a small sigh of relief.

"Of course," she replied with a sigh. "I have no appetite for them, but Mrs. Allen insists on providing me with the option to eat... I am told that the preserve is her own recipe."

"How lucky that your mother employed such talented women in her kitchens."

"Indeed." Anne's reply was full of exhaustion, and Elizabeth poured her a cup of tea and brought it to her bedside.

"Drink this when you are feeling stronger," Elizabeth said. "It will be just as efficacious when it is cold as when it is hot."

"Thank you," Anne murmured. "I am quite exhausted, though I have done nothing yet today. How silly."

"It is not silly at all," Elizabeth said. "You must rest. Rest will help you recover from whatever is plaguing you."

"I do hope so. It seems a shame to spend the best part of the year abed."

"I cannot disagree with that," Elizabeth said.

"I am sorry that it must be such a short visit, but—"

Elizabeth smiled and pulled the blankets up to cover Anne's shoulders. "No apologies are necessary," she said. "I can return whenever you like. All you need do is send word to the parsonage and I will come to visit you. Her Ladyship has also invited us for Christmas supper..."

"Of course she has," Anne said. "Mother would not miss an opportunity to have as many guests in the house as possible for such an event."

"Mr. Darcy has also begun to organize a Christmas shoot," Elizabeth said. "I daresay the house will be very full, indeed."

Anne frowned briefly and then turned her face away. "I abhor such displays," she said. "I wish Mr. Darcy much good fortune with his shooting. But I shall not be eating any of the spoils of their enterprise."

"Of course," Elizabeth said.

She took a linen napkin and wrapped two of the jam smothered scones into it. "I shall see you very soon, Anne. Rest and drink your tea when you wake. It will help to ease your stomach pains."

"It seems to be the only thing that does," Anne sighed. "Goodbye, Miss Elizabeth, do enjoy those scones on my behalf."

"I shall, indeed," Elizabeth said.

She crept from the room and closed the door carefully. She needed somewhere private to try the scones. If her suspicions were correct, there was something in the jam that was making Anne ill. She walked down the corridor and tried the handle on the closest door and frowned to find it locked.

The next door she tried was unlocked and Elizabeth checked the corridor before she entered the room and closed the door

behind her.

She shivered at the sudden cold and walked to the small couch that had been set in front of a small fireplace. The room had been arranged as a simple sitting room, and held nothing more than the couch, one elegant chair, a simple slender bookshelf and a potted palm. There were three lamps in the room, but none of them were lit, and the room was only dimly illuminated by the winter sun that filtered through the sheer curtains covering the solitary window at the rear of the space. A strange room to find in a large house, but it would serve Elizabeth's purpose well enough.

She sat down on the couch and set the napkin in her lap. Elizabeth took a deep breath and then opened the napkin to reveal the rich, buttery scones and the bright berry jam.

"One bite," she murmured.

She hesitated for only a moment, and then plucked a scone from the napkin and held it up to her nose. She inhaled deeply, hoping that she would be able to detect something strange about the smell of the jam, but instead of a sinister tang, she could only smell raspberries, strawberries, blackberry, and currant.

Heavenly.

Elizabeth dipped her finger into the jam and placed it into her mouth. The explosion of sweetness and the tart of the berries was wonderful, but then that same burning sensation she had felt upon her lips the last time she had tasted one of the pastries Anne had been served with her tea flared to life.

She remembered the stare of Margaret's lifeless eyes as she had lain on the stone floor of the parsonage kitchen. She could not eat much of this scone. That was certain. But she had to know.

"Perhaps a small bite," she whispered as she broke the corner off the scone she held. She looked at the crumb, golden colored with a dab of red jam on top. "A moment's courage, and it is done."

Elizabeth closed her eyes and put the corner of the scone into her mouth. She chewed carefully savoring the sweetness of the jam

and the softness of the scone, but then the burning sensation began again. She fought the urge to spit it out and swallowed instead.

She had not intended to swallow it.

The burning sensation continued down her throat and forced Elizabeth to gasp for breath. No jam she had ever tasted felt like that when she swallowed. She sat still for a few moments as she caught her breath. She waited for something to happen, but nothing did. *Perhaps a small bite was not enough.* But then she remembered how she had found Margaret and her thought of taking a large bite disappeared.

Instead, she broke off another piece and popped it into her mouth. This time, she chewed sparingly and swallowed quickly. There was no burning sensation this time, only the sweetness of the jam, and Elizabeth wondered if she had imagined the painful sensation she had first experienced.

She sat quietly upon the couch and set the remainder of the scones aside. Anne usually felt ill after mealtimes. Perhaps whatever had been put into the food took some time to affect the system. She drummed her fingers upon her knees, nervously waiting for whatever might happen. She had not eaten much, but if there were anything nefarious present within the sweets, she would know soon enough.

Even a mild symptom would be enough to convince her that she was correct.

Elizabeth looked around the room, hopeful that she would find something to distract herself from waiting, but before she could locate anything, her stomach began to feel tight and a cold sweat broke out upon her brow.

She pressed a hand against her stomach as it cramped again and the room began to spin. Elizabeth pushed herself off the couch and staggered to the window, but she could not open it. She needed fresh air, something, anything, or she would—

In desperation, Elizabeth lurched toward the potted palm and flung herself onto the carpet beside it. Her breathing was shallow

and her stomach roiled and clenched with pain before the unthinkable happened—

She had never vomited into a potted palm before...

Elizabeth sat back on the carpet, panting. Her stomach cramps were gone, and there was only the lingering burn in her throat to remind her of what had just happened. She grimaced and pushed herself up off the floor. If she'd had any doubts about whether or not Anne was being poisoned, they were well and truly gone now.

She staggered to the couch and sat down upon the edge of it, bracing herself against the arm as she glared at the offending scones. The only question that remained in her mind was how she might go about confronting Mrs. Allen about what was truly happening in the kitchens of Rosings Park...

As soon as she felt steady enough on her feet, Elizabeth gathered the remainder of the scones into the linen napkin once more and wrapped them tightly. She would need the evidence to bring with her. She eyed the potted fern and made a face at the memory of her recent encounter with it... There was nothing to be done, and she could not tell anyone what had happened—*the embarrassment of it*.

She left the room carefully, making certain to check the corridor before she stepped out and closed the door behind her.

For such a large house, it was strange to see the corridors so empty. Seasonal decorations covered the doorways and elegant tables had been festooned with boughs and arrangements of gold-painted fruit, winter-blooming flowers and hardy foliage. The house smelled wonderful, and Elizabeth felt a sudden pang that she was not at Longbourn to help her sisters with the decorations. Lydia would be decorating her own home this Christmas and she wondered if her youngest sister had felt a similar tug of regret and nostalgia. She would have to help Charlotte decorate the parsonage when she returned—Mr. Collins had been so consumed by the preparations for Rosings Park's holiday festivities and those planned for his parishioners that Elizabeth was certain that he had neglected his own home in the process.

But before she could do that, Elizabeth had another focus. She pressed her lips together into a firm line and straightened her

shoulders. She would have to confront Mrs. Allen about the scones. They had clearly been meant for Anne de Bourgh to eat—just as the pastries that had stricken Margaret and caused her death... Whoever was behind this dreadful poison was already a murderer, and Elizabeth knew that they would not stop until their terrible task was complete.

Elizabeth walked down the corridor quickly, looking for a familiar painting to show her the direction to turn to find the stairs that led down to the kitchens. There—a portrait of a long dead de Bourgh ancestor. Posing with three racing dogs, the man's hand pointed toward the left and Elizabeth nodded her gratitude to the portrait before turning the corner and quickening her pace.

The stairs appeared to the right, almost hidden against the wood paneling that covered the walls, and she took them without hesitation. She did not care if she met anyone on her way, she would not be stopped for any reason, and she was ready for a challenge. Her stomach ached faintly, and there was a sharp taste in her mouth. She wished that she had been able to take a sip of water or tea to drown out the memory of the last hour, but it could not be helped.

She could hear the buzz of the servant's quarters before she saw it. Kitchen maids and cooks bustled about the kitchen space, pulling loaves of bread from the oven and cutting meat that had been brought in from the gamekeeper's cottage. A deer carcass lay upon the table, and Mrs. Allen, covered from fingertip to elbow in gore, worked at carving the rich, dark meat away from the shining white bones.

The other women in the kitchen eyed Elizabeth with some suspicion, but no one stood in her way or attempted to question her presence in the kitchen. "Mrs. Allen," Elizabeth called out as she approached. "I would speak with you if you have a moment?"

The cook looked up in surprise and then back down at her work. "I am a trifle busy at the moment, Miss Bennet," she said in a sing-song voice that seemed entirely out of place for the activity

that she was currently undertaking. "Can it wait?"

"I am afraid not," Elizabeth said sharply. "This is a matter of life and death!"

A few of the kitchen maids turned wide eyes to Elizabeth, but she did not allow their stares to distract her.

Mrs. Allen's back stiffened at Elizabeth's words and she turned from the carcass slowly. "Girls, you may go and see how Mrs. Curran is faring with the potatoes for supper," she said to the kitchen maids who were close by. The girls exchanged a panicked glance and then dropped what they were doing and hurried away. Elizabeth briefly thought to call them back, they could have been her witnesses... but now she was alone in a secluded corner of the kitchen with Mrs. Allen, and she had a very difficult task ahead of her.

"Yes, Miss Bennet, what might I do for you?" Mrs. Allen said pleasantly. "As you can see I am extremely busy preparing her Ladyship's supper."

"And have you prepared anything special for Miss de Bourgh?" Elizabeth asked.

The cook's smile faltered and then widened. "No, indeed. Her Ladyship has asked that all of her guests be served in the same manner. No changes or substitutions."

"I see. And has her Ladyship asked for anything to be added to Miss de Bourgh's meals?"

"Added?"

"Indeed." Elizabeth unfolded the napkin to reveal the scones. Mrs. Allen's eyebrow rose slightly, but that was the only change in her expression upon seeing them. "These scones were served to Miss de Bourgh at teatime—"

"Of course they were," Mrs. Allen said. "They are her favorite."

"And was there any special ingredient added to the jam?"

"I confess that the addition of black currants are my own secret ingredient," Mrs. Allen chuckled.

"I daresay there is more that was added to your recipe,"

Elizabeth said sharply. Her stomach clenched at the memory of the taste of the jam and she grimaced.

“I do not take your meaning,” Mrs. Allen said.

“I believe that you do,” Elizabeth said. “Those scones were meant for Miss de Bourgh’s consumption. I took one bite, one single bite and was ill almost immediately after.”

Mrs. Allen’s eyes widened and her calm expression faltered just a little. “I am grieved to hear it,” she said. “You look quite well—shall I ring for Mrs. Brandon?”

“That will not be necessary,” Elizabeth said. “I know that there are ingredients being added to Miss de Bourgh’s food to make her ill. And I know that it is you who are doing it. I was not expected at tea today, and thus the pastries that were sent up for her were tainted with the same poison that you have been adding to her food... On Lady Catherine’s orders!”

“I have done no such thing,” Mrs. Allen said vehemently. Her eyes sparkled strangely in the light from the cooking fires and Elizabeth took a step back. “Lady Catherine sends me no orders save for the ones that pertain to her own menu and plans for the Christmas feast. No more. No less.”

“So you deny any wrongdoing?”

“Most assuredly! You must have had a sensitivity to something in the jam, nothing more!” The woman’s voice held an edge of panic and Elizabeth wondered what she might be hiding, but she could not accuse her again. Once was quite enough. But Elizabeth was not convinced, and her memory of Margaret’s lifeless face after she had choked on one of the very pastries that had been delivered to Miss de Bourgh.

Of course she would not admit to Lady Catherine’s manipulations. If she *were* acting on her Ladyship’s behalf, she would not say anything. Elizabeth would not have said anything if she had found herself in the same situation.

Elizabeth’s eyes slid to the deer carcass on the table and the stacks of meat that had been cut from the bone. “I have heard that

dressing wild game carcasses is a difficult procedure,” she said quickly. “But you seem to have no trouble.”

“My father taught me well,” Mrs. Allen said brightly, but the smile on her face did not meet her eyes and it gave her otherwise happy expression a somewhat sinister gleam.

“I see.”

“Is there anything else, Miss Bennet,” she asked.

The cook had denied Elizabeth’s accusations, and there were no witnesses to the event.

“I had meant to ask you about your reaction to the announcement of the winter shooting party,” Elizabeth said. She dared to step closer, but Mrs. Allen took a step back at the same time.

“My reaction?”

“You dropped a tray,” Elizabeth said. “A loaded tray.”

“I did, indeed,” Mrs. Allen snapped and Elizabeth was taken aback by her sudden change in demeanor.

“Was it the surprise of the announcement? Surely you will have time to order and prepare the meals that will be required for her Ladyship’s guests. It must have been upsetting to have such a thing thrust upon you so unexpectedly.

Elizabeth gasped as Mrs. Allen stepped toward her, brandishing the carving knife she had been holding.

“You don’t understand,” the cook hissed.

“Then explain it to me,” Elizabeth choked out. “Was there something that upset you about the announcement?”

“You don’t belong here,” Mrs. Allen said. Her voice was low and dangerous, and Elizabeth felt a prickle of fear run up her spine. The kitchen was oddly noisy, and if she had called for help she did not know if anyone would hear her. She glanced around quickly, but every back was turned to her. She was strangely alone in the room—and Mrs. Allen was holding the knife so very tightly...

“You are right,” Elizabeth said quickly. “I shall speak to Mrs.

Brandon...”

Mrs. Allen lunged forward and the knife glittered in the firelight. Elizabeth jumped back with a choked cry and then turned and ran from the kitchen as fast as her legs could carry her. Her shoulder crashed against one of the kitchen maids, and sent her spinning away, and the back of Elizabeth’s hand scraped against the rough stone side of the baking oven. She cried out in pain, but did not stop running until the soft carpet of the main floor corridor was under her feet.

She sucked in a deep breath of the cold air of the main floor and brushed tears away from her cheeks with her fingertips.

The back of her hand stung and she flinched as she saw that it had been scraped raw by the stones she had struck during her escape. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she was quite certain that if she had not escaped the kitchens, that she would have been gravely injured by the cook.

“She is mad, surely,” Elizabeth muttered to herself.

She took another fortifying breath and then marched down the corridor in search of Mr. Chester. She found the butler in the dining room, polishing the glassware in preparation for the Christmas meal which was now only days away.

She requested a carriage to take her back to the parsonage, and then left the dining room to wait in the parlor.

There was nothing she wanted more at that moment than to escape Rosings Park for the safety of the parsonage. She needed time to think, and she needed Charlotte’s advice... She would have given anything for a moment of Jane’s clear-headed opinion... But there was no time to write a letter and await her reply. Her sister would by now have returned to Longbourn, which meant any letter, and any subsequent reply, would be even more delayed.

Elizabeth was so full of her own wild thoughts that she did not notice that the room was occupied.

“Miss Bennet, are you quite well?”

Mr. Darcy’s familiar voice pulled Elizabeth out of her

determined trance and she stopped short. “I do apologize,” she said, “I did not mean to disturb you.”

“On the contrary,” the gentleman replied as he set aside the book he had been reading. “I was just thinking that I should find something more diverting to pass the time between this hour and supper. But you have not answered my question, Miss Bennet. Are you quite well?”

Elizabeth rubbed a hand over her face. She was, indeed, very unwell. But it was not her body that plagued her, it was her mind. *Did she dare unburden herself to the gentleman? What if he were able to offer some insight?*

“Mr. Darcy, I am... I have—”

The gentleman leaned forward in his chair, an expression of amused interest on his face, and Elizabeth immediately felt as though she were making a mistake.

“You must promise that you will not speak until I am finished.”

Mr. Darcy’s eyebrow rose. “I shall say nothing.”

Elizabeth chewed her lip and tried to organize her frantic thoughts. The cook had only just threatened her with a knife... surely she was close to discovering something — but what?

“Miss Bennet you are making me nervous,” the gentleman said.

“I am trying to decide how to begin.”

“Begin?”

Elizabeth nodded and pressed the back of her hand to her cheek. “I came to Hunsford to be of help to Charlotte—Mrs. Collins—but when I became better acquainted with Miss de Bourgh I began to have a concern for her health.”

She paused, expecting the gentleman to say something, but he merely nodded.

“Her Ladyship did not seem overly worried about her daughter’s malady, and, in fact, seemed angry about it. The more I learned of her illness, the more concerned I became... and I wondered whether a mother could be driven to poison her own daughter.”

She said those last words haltingly. She had only ever spoken them aloud to Charlotte. And Mr. Darcy was the nephew of the very person that Elizabeth had just accused. In her mind it had not really been an accusation—but when spoken aloud, it seemed to take on a different life.

“What circumstance could lead to something like that?” Elizabeth continued. “What motive could there be? Anne is her only heir. Unless she has planned to name someone else in her will...”

Mr. Darcy shook his head in disbelief but he did not argue with her, and Elizabeth felt somewhat emboldened by the gesture.

“I thought it impossible at first,” she said, “but then Anne revealed to me that she had discovered her mother and Mr. Collins in an embrace—”

The gentleman snorted loudly. “You do not mean to suggest—”

“That they are lovers? I cannot say.” Elizabeth cringed slightly at the thought. To say that aloud had been difficult, and if the twisted expression upon Mr. Darcy’s face was any indication, it had been difficult to hear.

“But what lengths would a woman go to keep such a tryst a secret? If it were discovered, the ripples of ruin and scandal would touch anyone associated with Rosings Park...”

Mr. Darcy grimaced and pushed a hand through his dark hair. “Indeed,” he muttered. “But you do not know the truth of it. Have you made any confrontation?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Not any that have proven useful.”

“That is certainly not enough evidence to make any kind of claim, or accusation.”

“I am very well aware of that,” Elizabeth said angrily. She paced the carpet again as she tried to grasp any useful tidbits of information from her memories. “But the presence of poison is certain.”

“How do you know such a thing?”

“Anne is sick after mealtimes, and the doctor cannot find the

cause... one of the kitchen maids sent to the parsonage died after eating pastries that were meant for Anne to eat with her tea!"

"Easily explained," the gentleman said with a sigh. "An accident, surely. The girl might have been allergic to the filling, or something in the pastry."

"True. But, I, myself, have tried food that was meant for Anne's plate, and I have been dreadfully ill directly after eating it."

Mr. Darcy stood up from his chair and strode toward her and Elizabeth flinched away in surprise. "You have purposefully made yourself ill?" he demanded.

"It was not my intention," Elizabeth said quickly. "I merely wanted to see if my theory was correct. I believe that Lady Catherine, or someone who wishes this house ill, has been poisoning Anne de Bourgh's food. Her pastries, her soup, her meat and vegetables... anything and everything that she might consume has been tainted with it."

"What of the cook?" Mr. Darcy asked tersely.

"I spoke to her only a short time ago," Elizabeth said. "I asked if her Ladyship had asked her to put something into Anne's food..."

"And her response?"

Elizabeth shivered at the memory of the woman's blood-covered arms and the wicked gleam of the knife in her hand. "Neither favorable nor helpful," Elizabeth said.

"But the cook is the key to your suspicions," Mr. Darcy said. "You must question her again. She must know the answer."

"I do not know if that would be wise," Elizabeth said ruefully.

"I do not think that my aunt would wish such an illness upon my cousin," Mr. Darcy said vehemently. "Lady Catherine is... a difficult woman, but she is not a murderess, or someone who is likely to direct her servants to carry out such an act under her own roof."

"Then who could it be?" Elizabeth asked. "Who else would wish such malice upon this place?"

Mr. Darcy shook his head. "I could not say. A motive does not

spring to mind...”

But one had spring to Elizabeth’s mind. It was the image of the cook, her arms soaked in the blood of the stag she had been carving on the kitchen table. Her father had taught her how to joint and section the poor creature. The mention of the hunt...

“The gamekeeper,” Elizabeth whispered.

“What?”

“When you took me to speak to Mr. Nocks,” she said eagerly.

“He mentioned that the former gamekeeper had had a daughter in service. In the kitchens. A girl who made wonderful pastries...”

“But she disappeared from Rosings Park soon after his death,” Mr. Darcy said.

“What if she returned?”

“Returned?”

Elizabeth nodded. The notion was so obvious and she scolded herself inwardly for being so blind to what had been directly in front of her. “For revenge against the family that had taken her father away from her.”

Elizabeth was about to explain everything when their conversation was interrupted by a tersely polite knock on the parlor door.

Mr. Chester's stone-carved face twitched only slightly to find Elizabeth alone in the room with Mr. Darcy, but the butler said nothing even as Elizabeth's cheeks flamed red when she realized the improper nature of their conversation.

"Your carriage, Miss Bennet," he said stiffly.

"Thank you," she whispered and hurried out into the corridor. Mr. Darcy followed her, but she would not stop to speak to him further. Especially as Mr. Chester walked so close behind them.

"I have a great deal to consider, Mr. Darcy," she said as they reached the front door. "How are the preparations coming along for your shooting party?"

The gentleman realized at once that her change of conversation was intentional and he nodded briefly. "Very well, I thank you. My invitations have been returned, and I believe we shall be a merry number. Mr. Nocks will be kept very busy."

"A wonder that her Ladyship was so amenable to it," Elizabeth said. "After so many years without any hunting on the estate..."

"I can assure you that my aunt is, indeed, pleased to see such a sport return to Rosings Park. Lord de Bourgh, my uncle, was very fond of shooting and it was a great pity that it was halted."

Elizabeth glanced at the butler briefly but Mr. Chester's

expression did not change. “Such are the sacrifices that must be made in the face of a tragedy.”

“Indeed,” Mr. Darcy said.

Mr. Chester cleared his throat. “Your carriage, Miss Bennet.”

“Of course,” she said. “Good evening, Mr. Darcy.”

She stepped up into the carriage with the assistance of the driver and locked eyes with Mr. Darcy as the door closed.

Had she been too bold in telling him of her suspicions?

What if he went to his aunt and told her what he knew?

Doubt and confusion knotted in Elizabeth’s stomach and she fought the urge to jump from the moving carriage to beg Mr. Darcy to keep his counsel. She had spoken her suspicions aloud; for the moment, it had to be enough.

As the carriage rolled toward the parsonage Elizabeth turned the realization she had had in the parlor over, and over again in her mind. Of course, it made perfect sense that the former gamekeeper’s daughter would come back to Rosings Park. She had a different name, surely, but the intent would be there; and the desire for revenge.

Elizabeth needed time to work out her plan, and there was also the pressing matter of helping Charlotte with the decorations for the parsonage. Lady Catherine had been kind enough to send down burlap wrapped bundles of pine boughs and bags of gold-painted apples and even a basket of winter roses to make a centerpiece for the dining room table.

Mr. Collins was, of course, overjoyed at the wealth of gifts that had come from his patroness, but Elizabeth was suspicious of it. What reason would she have for sharing such things with the parsonage? Charlotte dismissed Elizabeth’s suspicious looks with a

wave of her hand.

“I am far too exhausted to argue,” she said with a sigh as Elizabeth placed another bough upon the parlor mantle. “I suppose I should just be happy to see some Christmas cheer around the parsonage.” She looked around the room somewhat dejectedly. “It is so different from Lucas Lodge.”

“Indeed it is,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “But you will be able to make it your own. And next year you will be more prepared for the season—and you will have a child to teach to love Christmastide as much as you do.”

“You are right, as always,” Charlotte said. Her smile was faint, but it was a smile that Elizabeth was glad to see. Charlotte had been very quiet over the last few days, and Elizabeth did not want her to be upset in any way. Dr. Gannet, no doubt coerced by her Ladyship, had given his permission for Charlotte to leave the parsonage to attend the glorious Christmas feast that Lady Catherine had arranged. The guests would be few, but the table would be groaning with food, wine, and pastries, and Charlotte could not have refused her Ladyship’s command even if she had wanted to.

In the meantime, Elizabeth had almost decided how she would confront Mrs. Allen about her involvement in Anne’s malady. She was certain that the cook was the cause of all of it. But the confession was necessary—Anne was in danger, and Elizabeth could not bear the thought of standing idly by while she was poisoned.

The only thing holding her back was the possibility that the confrontation would lead to a violent outburst, and if that *did* occur, she did not want to be alone with the cook. She had narrowly avoided injury the last time she had spoken with the woman, and she did not want to make the same mistake twice.

With the parsonage decorated, Elizabeth felt some satisfaction that there could be some happiness salvaged from the stress of Charlotte's pregnancy and the general feeling of unease and secrecy that surrounded Rosings Park and the parsonage.

However, Charlotte seemed to relax just a little and Elizabeth was comforted by that fact. Dr. Gannet visited every other day to check on Charlotte's progress, and the accoucheur seemed convinced that the child would arrive close to Christmas Eve, if not on the day.

Elizabeth thought it was a wonderful prediction, but Charlotte did not seem convinced.

"It seems an awful burden to have one's birthday so close to an event such as Christmas," she said with a frown. "I should think that a child would feel overshadowed by such things—"

"Then you must not allow that to happen," Elizabeth replied. "How the child perceives their own birthday will be due in part to how you perceive it. If it seems like a burden to you, it will be and the child will feel guilty. You do not want that for your daughter or son..."

Charlotte sighed heavily. "No. I do not."

"Come now," Elizabeth said brightly. "We shall have a wonderful dinner at Rosings Park tonight, and then you can turn all of your attention to the safe arrival of your child. This is a happy occasion, and the very best time of year to welcome such a joy into your life."

Charlotte smiled and Elizabeth leaned over to embrace her friend. "All will be well," she said. "I promise it."

Elizabeth was not usually so cavalier with promises that she could not be certain she would be able to keep, but Charlotte seemed to crave that assurance, and Elizabeth could not deny her friend the comfort of it.

Mr. Collins spent the time between luncheon and their

departure rushing about the parsonage and doing everything in his power to create stress and discomfort wherever he went. He praised the decorations and exclaimed over her Ladyship's 'continual condescension and favor' toward their general happiness. Elizabeth could only smile and do her best to stay out of his way as he bustled from room to room making certain that everything was in its place.

Elizabeth could not be certain just what was motivating the parson to such nervous activity, but she could only guess that it was the enormity of the invitation to take Christmas supper with her Ladyship that had inspired it.

"A most unexpected honor," he said breathlessly as Elizabeth came down the stairs with Charlotte. "To be invited to enjoy a holiday meal at the table of Lady Catherine de Bourgh—to be seated with the family and partake of such a sumptuous meal... It will be a Christmas to remember."

"Certainly," Elizabeth said dryly. "The birth of your first child will make this Christmastide all the more special."

Mr. Collins blinked in surprise and then smiled broadly as he took Charlotte's hand in his. "Of course," he said. "Such a wondrous occasion, indeed. There will be nothing in the world that could be more of a blessing."

Elizabeth smiled thinly and pulled her cloak over her shoulders before helping Charlotte fasten the ribbon at the neck of her cloak. Her friend appeared exhausted and somewhat pale, and Elizabeth hoped that it was a trick of the candlelight and nothing more. She had complained that the child had been very active of late, and the near-constant kicking and movement had made her weary and withdrawn.

The carriage that had been sent down from Rosings Park waited outside the parsonage gate, and Elizabeth took Charlotte's elbow to help her out the front door and down the path.

The sky had darkened and though she had hoped to see stars overhead, Elizabeth could only see the faint outline of clouds that

had gathered overtop of the parsonage and Rosings Park. The air smelled like snow, and she could not seem to chase away the feeling of foreboding that had followed her all day.

Mr. Collins leapt ahead of them to open the carriage door and stood by impatiently as Elizabeth helped Charlotte to climb the steps and settle herself into the seat. Once they were seated, Mr. Collins climbed into the carriage and gave sharp instruction to the driver to get underway.

“We must not keep her Ladyship waiting,” he said briskly. “Especially not this evening.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said, but the parson did not notice the terse manner of her reply, and Charlotte was focused on the snow-covered fields opposite the parsonage that glittered in the intermittent moonlight as the clouds moved overhead.

Charlotte remained silent for the journey, and Elizabeth squeezed her friend’s hand reassuringly as the carriage turned a now familiar corner and the front of the house loomed before them. The doors had been decorated with ribbons and pine boughs and Elizabeth felt a small tingle of delight as she looked at them. It was difficult not to feel joyful at this time of year, though her emotions were somewhat dampened to be away from Longbourn and the noise of her family. She had not realized that she missed such things, but at that moment she did with an intensity that made her throat tighten briefly.

“I must confess that I am excited to see the meal that her Ladyship has planned for us,” Elizabeth said. Charlotte nodded absently, but Mr. Collins took the opportunity to launch into a description of every dish that Lady Catherine had ordered for the meal.

“I daresay that her Ladyship has gone to a great deal of trouble and expense to provide such a meal,” Mr. Collins said with a wide smile. “But her Ladyship, in her great generosity, could not be convinced otherwise.”

“Lovely,” Charlotte murmured.

The carriage came to a stop and Mr. Collins pushed the door open and stepped down to the gravel without waiting for the driver to offer his assistance. Instead of offering his hand to Charlotte, he walked directly to the front door and applied his hand to the great bell to announce their arrival. Elizabeth made a face as she helped Charlotte to take the driver's hand and then exited the carriage herself without the man's assistance.

Mr. Collins turned to them to encourage them to move more quickly, and then realized that his wife required his support to climb the stairs. He sprang into action and brought Charlotte to the landing, but Elizabeth wondered if he would have done so if they door had been opened more quickly.

As it was, she was just climbing the stairs when the door opened and Mr. Chester's stern visage appeared in the doorway.

"A very happy Christmas to you, Mr. Chester," Mr. Collins said brightly.

The butler inclined his head and opened the door wide to accommodate them. His cold eyes stayed upon Charlotte as they walked past him, and he did not look at Elizabeth as she followed behind. The foyer was warm, but Elizabeth's teeth still chattered from the cold of the carriage ride.

A maid appeared to help the women out of their cloaks and Mr. Chester led the trio down the corridor toward the parlor where Lady Catherine awaited them.

Her Ladyship was dressed more finely than Elizabeth had seen before, and a jewelled tiara had been set upon her greying locks. Her expression was still imperious and condescending, but Elizabeth was certain that her Ladyship's smile was genuine as she welcomed them.

A maid came around with a tray of sherry glasses and Elizabeth took one gratefully. She felt certain that she would need something to fortify herself before she could undertake her mission to discover the truth behind Anne's illness—and Mrs. Allen's involvement in it.

"You are almost late, Mr. Collins," she said loftily. "But I suppose that could not be helped. Mrs. Collins you look very tired, indeed, are you quite well?"

"Very well, I thank you," Charlotte said as Mr. Collins led her to a chair.

"Dr. Gannet is very pleased with your progress," Lady Catherine said. "He tells me that the child is very active. A good sign that a boy will soon be on the way."

"Indeed," Charlotte replied softly. She and Elizabeth had shared their hopes that the child would be a girl, and Elizabeth did not trust the word of doctors when it came to a child's sex. Her mother had been assured no less than five times that she would bear a son, and now had five daughters to show for all those promises.

Mr. Darcy stood near the window where he spoke quietly with Dr. Gannet, and Elizabeth glanced at the pair briefly. For her Ladyship to welcome them so warmly meant that the gentleman had not said anything to his aunt. At least, that was Elizabeth's hope.

"I had expected Colonel Fitzwilliam to join us as well," Lady Catherine said to Mr. Collins, "but he has been waylaid in London. No doubt he has been invited to a Christmas ball or some such thing. That young man will not rest until he has found himself a wealthy bride."

Elizabeth bit her lip to keep from laughing. She had liked Colonel Fitzwilliam immediately, but his desire for an heiress had meant that they were destined only to be friends—a status that suited Elizabeth quite well, indeed.

"Will Miss de Bourgh be joining us this evening?" Elizabeth asked.

Lady Catherine turned her cold eyes upon her, and Elizabeth tried her best not to flinch under her Ladyship's scrutiny. "She will *not* be joining us."

"I hope she is not ill," Elizabeth said.

"She has not improved," Lady Catherine said shortly. "Dr.

Hargate assured me that she would be well enough to be seated at the table, but she has proven to be quite stubborn in her refusals to leave her bed.”

“I am sorry to hear it,” Elizabeth said. “Might I visit her?”

“Certainly not,” Lady Catherine snorted. “I will not reward her petulance with visits from friends, whomever they might be.”

Elizabeth was taken aback by her Ladyship’s response, but could not say or do anything more than nod her head in agreement. She could not flout Lady Catherine’s command, especially not on an evening where she would, indeed, be missed if she were somehow able to slip away from the table.

A bell rang somewhere in the corridor, and Lady Catherine brightened immediately. She drained the glass of sherry she held and set the small glass down upon the table beside her elegant chair.

Mr. Chester appeared at the door and bowed shortly.

“Dinner will be served, Madam,” he said.

Lady Catherine smiled and rose from her chair with Mr. Darcy’s assistance.

Elizabeth had expected they would be led into the usual dining room, but Mr. Chester took them down another path and brought them to a dining room that Elizabeth had not seen before. The room was impossibly large and smelled of expensive beeswax candles and even Charlotte’s face brightened to see the elegant table settings and the richness of the decor.

“How wonderful,” she breathed.

Wine and a bowl of brightly colored rum punch had been placed upon the sideboard, and the table had already been laid with small gingerbread cakes and sweetmeats. Charlotte’s eyes were wide as she looked at all the finery in the room, and Elizabeth hoped that she would be able to find some appetite for the food that would be presented during the course of the evening.

Mr. Collins had gone out of his way to describe the food that would be brought out, and Elizabeth could not decide which

course she was looking forward to more... but it was dessert that brought her the most worry. For after dessert, Lady Catherine would, of course, bring the cook in to congratulate her upon the meal, and it was only then that Elizabeth would be able to make her accusations. It would certainly cause a fuss, and Lady Catherine would be scandalized, but there was not other way to approach it. She needed witnesses to her revelations, for it would be the only way to guarantee that Mrs. Allen would not do anything rash.

At least, that was Elizabeth's hope.

As they were seated at the table and wine and punch were poured, Mr. Collins offered the first toast of the evening, dedicated, of course, to Lady Catherine de Bourgh for all of her generous condescension and care for the parsonage and the parishioners of Hunsford who benefitted from her largesse.

Lady Catherine accepted his praise with grace, but no humility. She knew precisely what her money and patronage meant to the parson, and Elizabeth knew that she would withhold it just as swiftly if she were displeased in any way. It was a fine balance, and the separation between her Ladyship's patronage and her disdain was very slight. One mistake could mean the loss of her favor, something from which the parsonage, and Mr. Collins, might never recover.

With the culmination of Mr. Collins' speech, the dining room was suddenly flooded with servants bearing platters of food.

Tender sliced of venison that had been cooked in a dark, fruit-based sauce, small hand-made sausages were set onto plates, and the traditional presentation of the boar's head passed by in a blur.

Elizabeth had scarcely finished half of her carefully decorated plate when it was whisked away and another set before her. A delicate white soup was followed by a small mince pie with a delicate pastry top, and then the final course—a goose, draped in its snow white cape of feathers, was brought into the room to the applause of the guests.

Elizabeth had never seen so large, or such a well presented bird. The goose had been stuffed with fruit that had, no doubt, been ordered in at great expense from London, and the smell of baked oranges and citrus filled the air as the goose was carved.

She marveled at the crispness of the skin and the tender flesh that was placed upon her plate and mourned the fact that she would have to eat quickly to prevent the meat from going to waste.

Out of the corner of her eye she watched Charlotte pick at her food, but she looked genuinely uncomfortable, and a little ill as she shifted in her seat.

She leaned over and placed her hand upon Charlotte's arm. "Are you quite well?" she whispered.

Charlotte nodded, but then flinched in pain. "I am fine," she said. "Though I do wish that I had stayed at the parsonage..."

"We do not have to stay long after supper," Elizabeth assured her. In fact, she had a feeling that as soon as she had confronted the cook that Lady Catherine would demand their immediate departure. It was a risk she was willing to take to save Anne's life. It was necessary, she was certain of that.

Elizabeth did her best to only sip at her punch and wine. The punch was richly flavored, and the alcohol was very strong, and she wanted to have a clear head for what was to come.

She was engaged in conversation with Dr. Gannet who was in the middle of a story about his time in Paris as an accoucheur to some of the wealthiest women at Napoleon's court when the dinner plates were whisked away along with the remnants of the goose to make room for the Christmas pudding.

The dessert was brought into the room with great ceremony by Mrs. Allen and lit aflame by Mr. Chester who stood by proudly as the massive pudding was set down upon a small table that had been decorated just for that purpose.

Elizabeth kept her eyes upon the cook as the pudding was cut and served. Mrs. Allen poured a sauce upon the pudding from a small earthenware jug, but when she scanned the table to see how

many plates would be required, she looked somewhat confused to see that there was an empty chair at the table. Elizabeth noticed a second jug almost hidden from sight upon the pudding table, and took note of the change in Mrs. Allen's expression as she realized that Anne was not among their number.

As the final plate was laid before the guests, Lady Catherine stood up from her chair to thank the staff for their service.

"... You have, indeed, outdone yourselves this year," she said loftily. "Mrs. Allen, you are a new addition to our household, but you have brought back traditions that have not been seen in this house since my dear Henry passed away."

Elizabeth glanced at the cook, half-expecting her to give some sign of her guilt, but the woman merely smiled and curtsied as an acceptance of the praise.

The guests at the table applauded politely, and while Mr. Chester and Mrs. Brandon turned to leave Elizabeth saw Mrs. Allen turn to the pudding to cut another slice. She laid it upon a plate and dressed it with sauce from the second, hidden, jug.

No one else seemed to have marked the woman's action, and Elizabeth stood up from her chair. "Mrs. Allen, where are you taking that pudding?" she asked loudly.

All conversation in the room ceased and the cook froze in the doorway. She turned slowly, the hand that held the plate of pudding shook gently and then stopped.

"To Miss de Bourgh, of course," Mrs. Allen replied.

"But her Ladyship did not ask you to do so," Elizabeth said. Lady Catherine sat up straighter and glared at the cook.

"Miss Bennet is correct. Anne was too ill to come to the dinner table, therefore she will not be given any dessert."

Mrs. Allen's eyes darted from Lady Catherine to Elizabeth. "I only thought—"

"You shall do no such thing," Lady Catherine snapped. "You will put that plate down at once."

Mrs. Allen walked back to the pudding table and set the plate

down.

“Why did you pour the sauce from a different jug?” Elizabeth asked quickly.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Mrs. Allen said.

The guests at the table were all staring at the cook now, and Elizabeth could feel the weight of their surprise at their dinner being interrupted in such a way.

Mrs. Brandon hovered in the doorway, and Elizabeth expected the housekeeper’s intervention at any moment.

“You had two jugs of sauce,” Elizabeth said. “One for our pudding, and one for Mis de Bourgh. I saw you do it.”

“You are mistaken,” Mrs. Allen said.

“I do not think so,” Elizabeth replied firmly. “But you have made several special meals for Miss de Bourgh, have you not?”

The cook’s smile faltered just a little.

Lady Catherine set down her fork. A dangerous sign. “Is this true?”

Mrs. Allen’s mouth opened and then closed, but she did not reply to her Ladyship’s question.

“You have only just returned to Rosings Park, is that not true?” Elizabeth said. “Twenty years is a long time to stay away from a house that has meant so much to your family.”

“This house has brought my family nothing but misery,” Mrs. Allen snapped.

“What is the meaning of this?” Lady Catherine said in a shrill voice.

“Mrs. Allen has been in your employ in the past, your Ladyship,” Elizabeth said. “Her father was Mr. Greymouth, the former gamekeeper.”

“The gamekeeper? But he had no family—”

“No family that *you* cared to acknowledge,” Mrs. Allen snapped. “It is your fault that he was killed. Murdered doing what he loved most in all the world... Your dear husband is to blame for his death. He killed my father and you refused to give one penny to

his daughter in return for his sacrifice!”

“I cannot— How preposterous,” Lady Catherine spluttered.

“*You* are to blame!”

Elizabeth gasped as Mrs. Allen turned and grasped the handle

of the knife that had been used to cut the pudding. She withdrew it quickly and turned to lunge toward the table, but Mr. Darcy moved quickly and stood between the cook and his aunt.

Her face was reddened and wild with rage as she lunged at Mr. Darcy, but he moved aside easily, avoiding her strike, and grasped her wrist tightly.

The cook cried out and tried to struggle against his grip, but Mr. Darcy pulled the knife from her grasp and it fell to the carpet with a *thud*.

Mr. Chester and Mrs. Brandon rushed into the room and the butler took Mrs. Allen by the shoulders and held her tightly as Mr. Darcy brushed pudding crumbs from his dinner jacket and retrieved the knife from the carpet.

Mrs. Allen squirmed in the butler's grip, but the man kept a tight hold of her shoulders and forced her down into a chair. "Shall I take her away, your Ladyship?" he asked stiffly.

Lady Catherine shook her head in disbelief. "Is this true? Are you Mr. Greymouth's daughter?"

"I am," Mrs. Allen replied furiously. "I worked in your kitchens, and I was sent away without a penny or a reference. My father was murdered on your estate, but no one would believe me! They said a Lord would never do such a thing."

"And he would not," Mr. Darcy said darkly. "My uncle was a

fair-minded man. He would not have killed in cold blood.”

“I don’t believe it for a moment,” Mrs. Allen cried. “There would be no other explanation for it. *She* was going to do away with the gamekeeper’s post on the estate. My father told me that he would speak to Lord de Bourgh about it. They argued. Bitterly. My father was angry with him, and Lord de Bourgh spoke harshly to him... And then he killed my father. Instead of sending him away with dignity, he killed him.”

Lady Catherine shook her head. “I cannot believe such a thing.”

“Why did you come back to Rosings Park?” Elizabeth asked. “After so many years?”

“I have spent twenty Christmases in mourning while she and her daughter lived on in this house...”

“Lady Catherine,” Elizabeth interrupted her. “Mrs. Allen was poisoning your daughter. I am convinced of it. She murdered a maid—”

“An accident,” Mrs. Allen cried. “I did not intend—”

“You intended for Miss de Bourgh to become so ill that she would not recover,” Elizabeth said firmly. “Poor Margaret was an innocent victim.”

Mrs. Allen’s head dropped. “I wanted her Ladyship’s heart to break at Christmastide as mine does every year.”

“The sauce,” Elizabeth murmured. “You would have completed your revenge with the sauce...”

Mrs. Allen did not reply, but Dr. Gannet rose from his chair and snatched the plate from the pudding table and examined it closely. His eyes narrowed in anger as it was clear that he could detect nothing amiss in the smell or the texture of the food. “How did you do it?” he demanded.

Elizabeth knew that the woman would not say anything, and when she looked up at Elizabeth her eyes were red-rimmed, but dry, and they were full of hate. “You have stolen my revenge from me,” she hissed.

“I have stolen nothing,” Elizabeth said. “Mr. Darcy spoke to Mr.

Nocks—the accident that killed your father was just that. An accident with the rifle. He could not have known that such a thing would happen. Lord de Bourgh was devastated at your father's death. He abolished hunting on the estate because of it.”

Silence fell over the room, but it was broken by a sharp gasp from Charlotte. Elizabeth turned just in time to see her friend grip the edge of the table tightly. Her cheeks were very pale, and she looked to Elizabeth with desperation in her eyes.

“Charlotte, what is it?”

“The baby,” she gasped. “I think the baby is coming.”

Charlotte gave another small cry of pain, and Dr. Gannet rushed to her side.

“I need a room for Mrs. Collins,” he said sharply to Mrs. Brandon. The housekeeper was shaken out of her frozen state and rushed from the room to comply with the doctor's demand.

“We shall see to Mrs. Allen,” Mr. Darcy said reassuringly. “You must help Mrs. Collins and Dr. Gannet.”

Elizabeth was filled with fear and excitement for Charlotte, and triumph at having exposed Mrs. Allen's crime... what they would do to her now was beyond her control, but Elizabeth suspected that there would be retribution for it.

Lady Catherine sat in her chair, shaken and flushed, and as she left the room to follow Charlotte and Dr. Gannet Elizabeth wondered if her Ladyship felt any guilt for her treatment of her only daughter.

C harlotte's labor and delivery progressed quickly, and the child arrived with greater speed than even Dr. Gannet had anticipated. Elizabeth was overwhelmed with emotion as she did all she could to help the accoucheur with towels and hot water, and she bathed

Charlotte's forehead and murmured encouragement to her when she cried out in pain.

When the child was laid in Charlotte's arms, Elizabeth was the first to kiss her friend on the forehead and congratulate her.

"A beautiful daughter," she whispered. Charlotte was exhausted, her hair damp with sweat, but she smiled down at the infant in her arms and cuddled her close.

"She is beautiful," Charlotte said.

Elizabeth could not have been more relieved to see Charlotte so happy, and she took solace in the fact that Charlotte would have the comfort of a daughter to see her through whatever else might come.

Dr. Gannet worked quickly and Elizabeth was able to tuck Charlotte into clean blankets while the child was swaddled and placed into a basket beside the bed.

"We should let Mrs. Collins rest," he said softly.

Elizabeth pulled herself away from Charlotte's bedside, kissed the baby on her plump pink cheek, and followed the doctor from the room. Charlotte was asleep almost as soon as the door had closed behind them and Elizabeth felt a sense of calm descend over her.

The doctor left her with Mr. Chester who led Elizabeth back to the parlor where Lady Catherine, Mr. Collins, and Mr. Darcy had awaited the news of the birth.

Mr. Collins' smile was broad as Elizabeth entered the room. "Ah, Cousin," he said. "Will you have a glass of punch to celebrate the birth of my first daughter?"

"I will, indeed," Elizabeth said gratefully.

"A pity it was not the son that Dr. Gannet promised," Lady Catherine said primly. "But Mrs. Collins is young and there is still time to beget a son that every father desires."

Elizabeth inclined her head as Mr. Collins agreed with her and began a discussion about the blessing of children upon a marriage. Elizabeth walked toward the window she looked out into the

darkness. It had begun to snow, and the white flakes had covered the tracks that had been left upon the courtyard by the carriage wheels when they had arrived.

Mr. Darcy approached the window, but Elizabeth did not turn to greet him. "Wonderful news," he said. "I am certain that Mrs. Collins will be grateful for a daughter."

"I believe she is," Elizabeth said. She had softened somewhat to the gentleman, but her thoughts were confused. She was still angry with him, but could not bring herself to confront it, or him.

"What will become of Mrs. Allen?" she asked quietly.

"She has been taken into town, and from there she will be sent into London. She must answer for Margaret's death, and the attempt on my cousin's life."

"Of course," Elizabeth murmured.

"Anne will be indebted to you," he said. "And my aunt as well, though she will not admit it."

Elizabeth smiled and sipped her punch. "I do not expect anything."

"Of course." The gentleman stood beside her and they stared out in the window in silence. Elizabeth, however, watched Mr. Darcy's reflection. He was still disagreeably handsome, and she felt a flare of annoyance at herself for noticing it.

"Have you received any other replies to your shooting party invitations?" she asked.

"I have, indeed. They will be arriving within the week."

"How wonderful. Mr. Nocks will be busy with the preparations, surely."

The gentleman smiled. "He is. And very enthusiastic about it."

"I am happy to hear it," she said.

"When will you return to Hertfordshire?"

Elizabeth sipped her punch. "Now that the child has been born, I shall be able to return within the week. I should like to be at Longbourn for Twelfth Night."

"I see."

Elizabeth wondered if there was some measure of regret in the gentleman's voice, or if she was mistaken in what she had heard. Mr. Darcy was different here, very different to the disagreeable gentleman she had known in Hertfordshire, and, indeed, since his proposal at the parsonage the previous year. *What had changed? Had her feelings toward him really been so altered by the time she had spent away from him?*

She felt a surge of boldness, and wondered if it could be attributed to the glass of punch in her hand. "Mr. Darcy, do you know if Mr. Bingley has any plans to return to Netherfield Park?"

In his reflection in the window, Elizabeth saw the gentleman smile briefly. "I do not know. But I shall ask him when next I see him."

"I daresay he would be very welcome in Hertfordshire should he choose to return," Elizabeth said. "You would all be very welcome."

She was not as certain about the latter part of her statement, but Mr. Bingley would, indeed, be warmly welcomed by all who had known him before his abrupt departure.

"I shall tell him so. He will be arriving in a few days' time to attend the shoot. Shall I convey your good wishes to him?"

Elizabeth inclined her head. "You are very kind to do so."

Due to Charlotte's condition, they were invited to stay the night at Rosings Park, and Elizabeth was grateful that she was able to stay near Charlotte and help her when the child woke in the night. Mr. Collins seemed overjoyed with the arrival of his daughter, and did not seem disappointed in the slightest which put Charlotte at greater ease.

Elizabeth did not see Mr. Darcy at breakfast, or at teatime, and

when Charlotte was bundled into the carriage to return to Rosings Park, Elizabeth feared that she would not see him at all. She could not help but wonder why she was bothered by that fact and did her best to push such feelings away. Mr. Darcy was nothing to her. He had been of great assistance in her search for the truth behind Anne's illness, and had subdued Mrs. Allen... and she had not been able to thank him properly for his intervention. Perhaps that was the reason behind her disquiet, but she could not be certain.

"Must you return to Hertfordshire so soon?" Charlotte asked as Elizabeth packed her valise.

"Indeed, I must," Elizabeth said. "I have been away for far too long, and I should like to return before Twelfth Night."

"I shall miss you," Charlotte said. Elizabeth smiled at her friend and pulled her into a tight embrace.

Elizabeth leaned over the bassinet that had been brought into the room and tapped her finger gently against the baby's nose. "I shall visit very soon. It will be very difficult to stay away now that I have such a lovely flower to visit."

"Little Helena will miss you, too," Charlotte said, "though she will not know it at first."

"Your mother will come and visit soon, I have no doubt," Elizabeth said.

Charlotte laughed. "Mama would rather that I come home to Lucas Lodge," she said, "but I fear that if I do I will not have the inclination to leave again."

Elizabeth did not say it, but she would be glad to leave Rosings Park. Her suspicions about the nature of the relationship between Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine had not been proven false, but she did not know if she wanted them to be confirmed. She could be content to leave that mystery untouched.

In the days since Mrs. Allen's confession and departure from the Rosings Park kitchens, Anne's health had improved steadily and Elizabeth was confident that she would recover her full faculties in a few weeks.

Dr. Gannet had concerns that her stomach would be permanently damaged by the amount of poison she had consumed, but Elizabeth could hold out hope that his diagnosis was more dire than necessary. Anne had always been frail, and she had been lucky to have survived Mrs. Allen's nefarious attempt to punish Lady Catherine... Whether or not the events that had occurred had any affect on her Ladyship remained to be seen, but Elizabeth did not think it possible that such things could occur without some changes left in their wake.

As long as her Ladyship's treatment of her daughter improved, Elizabeth would be satisfied. Anne had promised to write, and Elizabeth wondered if she would continue to be candid about her life at the estate. Perhaps now she would be able to fulfil her mother's wish of securing a proposal, but more for the fact that it would mean Anne would be able to escape Rosings Park and her mother's looming presence.

"Then you must bow to your mother's wishes and come for a visit," Elizabeth said. She closed her valise and secured the clasps tightly. "It is very strange to be in Hertfordshire without your presence. I am certain that Mr. Collins would not begrudge you a visit, especially to bring your child to see her grandparents."

"Indeed, not," Charlotte said with a smile. "I do not feel as though he could refuse any request."

"He seems very happy to be a father," Elizabeth said gently.

Charlotte nodded. "He does. And he has made no mention of a son or wanting another child... I should think that I would be very content just to have Helena."

Elizabeth embraced her friend once more and then lifted her valise off the bed. Charlotte laid the sleeping baby against her shoulder and followed Elizabeth down the stairs to the foyer. The carriage waited outside the parsonage gate, and Elizabeth pulled her cloak around her shoulders. She felt a small stab of regret to leave Charlotte behind, but she could not tarry any longer.

"I shall write to you as soon as I return home," Elizabeth said.

“I am sure that you are starved for news of Hertfordshire.”

“I am,” Charlotte admitted. “Mama does not write often enough, and Mariah’s letters are filled with news that is of no consequence to me... I shall look forward to your letters with great anticipation.”

“And you must promise me that you will tell me everything that Miss Helena does, for I am very invested in her happiness.” Elizabeth said as she kissed the baby’s cheeks.

“As am I,” Charlotte laughed.

Elizabeth could have lingered in the doorway forever, but the carriage driver coughed loudly and Elizabeth lifted her valise and rushed over the path toward the waiting carriage. The driver helped her up and set her valise with the other passengers’ luggage.

It would be a long journey back to Longbourn, but perhaps she could use the time to sort through her confused feelings for Mr. Darcy...

Would he keep his word and speak to Mr. Bingley? What if they returned to Netherfield Park?

Could she say anything to Jane about his promise, or would it be too cruel to set Jane’s hopes aflame only to have them doused when Mr. Bingley did not appear as she wished.

As the carriage rolled away from the parsonage, Elizabeth waved to Charlotte and baby Helena. She had never spent a Christmastide in such a manner, nor been in such danger... Elizabeth resolved that she would not do such a thing again, but the thrill of discovering the truth, and saving Anne de Bourgh’s life in the process, had been intoxicating. She did not like to think of herself as a suspicious person, but she was observant enough to notice when things were amiss.

Returning to life at Longbourn would be a welcome change—she longed for the noise and bustle of her family and the quiet pace of Meryton’s streets. Springtime would carry the promise of new officers arriving in town to join the garrison, which would mean

more assemblies and Regimental balls. Elizabeth's opinion of officers had soured somewhat, but she still loved to dance, and it served no purpose to judge every officer by the same token as she judged Mr. Wickham.

There was much to look forward to, and Elizabeth tucked her hopes for Mr. Bingley's return close to her heart. If he did return, it could mean happiness for Jane, and if Mr. Darcy accompanied him, perhaps Elizabeth could reconsider her feelings for him as well.

Perhaps.

THE END...

FOR NOW.

Upon a Winter's Star

A Pride and Prejudice Holiday Variation

Longbourn ~ July 1816

It had never occurred to Elizabeth Bennet that she would marry for any reason other than the discovery that she were, indeed, in the throes of the very deepest love. But as the seasons wore on and her birthdays passed she began to wonder if the notion of a very deep love was something that was far too... difficult to achieve.

And now, on the morning of her twenty-sixth birthday, with two younger sisters married and gone away, Elizabeth was not certain that she would ever find what she was looking for.

She stared into the vanity mirror and let out a heavy sigh.

Perhaps it was time to compromise.

Her elder sister Jane had, herself, experienced no shortage of marriage proposals, which she had also declined. But Jane did not seem as distressed with this course of events as Elizabeth. She had taken it upon herself to assist Kitty with her new household, and spent much of her time in Meryton with their younger sister and her children.

She had, however, refused to take the room that had been offered to her, and preferred to stay at Longbourn. To accommodate this change in her life, all of their lives, Jane would wake early and eat breakfast before the rest of the house had risen. By the time Lydia and Mrs. Bennet came downstairs, she would already have departed for Meryton. Elizabeth had adapted to the same schedule so that they might spend more time together.

“Will you stay here all morning,” Jane laughed as she pulled the coverlet back up over her bed. “It is your birthday, my dearest, Lizzy, and frowning at your reflection will not change anything.”

Elizabeth made a face at her sister’s reflection. “I am not frowning.”

“Of course not.” Jane said as she laid a hand on her shoulder. “What is bothering you?”

Elizabeth pushed back from the vanity and wished that it were winter once more. The summer months seemed so utterly—long. “Do you ever wish that you...” She paused for a moment, walked toward the window and wondered if Jane would even want to answer such a question.

“What is it?”

She tapped her fingers against the window ledge and looked down at the gardens below. The leaves of the poplar trees were full and green, but Autumn was on its way, and before long those branches would be bare and the house would be preparing for Christmastide.

“Would you take back your refusal of any of your marriage proposals?”

Jane was silent for a moment, and Elizabeth worried that she had upset her, but when she turned away from the window, Jane was checking her reflection in the vanity mirror and seemed entirely unaffected by the question.

“None of my refusals were made lightly,” she said at last. “Each of the gentlemen who made an offer of marriage... they were from good families, and would have offered me a life of comfort.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrow rose slightly. “However?”

Jane straightened and smiled. “They had made their offers after only a short time of knowing me, and while they might have believed themselves to have developed a great affection for me... I felt nothing for them.”

“None of them?”

Jane shook her head and Elizabeth stared at her incredulously.

“But, Jane... Mr. Drake, he was so very handsome, and he had a tolerable wit.”

Jane shook her head and laughed. “You are quite correct. But he was a merchant, and I did not wish to leave Hertfordshire—did you know he promised Papa that he would take me abroad? To India! I have no desire to do any such thing.”

“I would go in a heartbeat,” Elizabeth sighed. “And what of Mr. Baker?”

Jane made a face. “A lawyer. Papa would never have forgiven me if I had accepted.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I do not doubt such a thing.” Her mirth faded away as she looked at her sister, and she held out her hand. “Are you happy with your decisions?”

“I am,” Jane replied. The answer was not rushed, defensive, or self-pitying and Elizabeth could not help but smile. “Now I am free to help our poor Kitty—I told her that she should not have agreed to marry an officer of the militia...”

“But she would not be convinced,” Elizabeth laughed.

Jane’s eyes twinkled with merriment. “Not for all the world.”

“Now if only we could find a suitable gentleman for dear Lydia.”

Jane rolled her eyes toward the heavens. “Our dear Lydia would much rather dance with every young officer at the regimental ball than decide on *one* gentleman to dance with for the rest of her life.”

“She had better make a decision sooner than later,” Elizabeth sighed. “I fear that Mama will go mad with her matchmaking attempts if any more are thwarted.”

“Perhaps if they were of a more exciting breed than the young men she has chosen thus far...” Jane looked thoughtful for a moment. “No more ink-stained clerks, or lawyers, and certainly no more —certainly no more clergymen.”

“*Certainly* not!”

Jane squeezed her sister’s fingers gently. “But what is all of this

sudden interest in marriage and proposals?”

Elizabeth sighed heavily and pulled her hand from her sister’s grasp. “Perhaps I have been thinking too much of late.”

“About?”

“About such things. Do you think that I have been too... particular in my search? Or that I should not be so strident in my refusals?”

Jane laughed and shook her head. “Mama would, perhaps, agree with you. But if you were to ask Papa, I should think he would disagree most vigorously.”

“Papa would like nothing better than for the both of us to remain in this house until we are old and gray,” Elizabeth laughed. “And I may just be able to oblige him.”

Jane’s smile faded. “If only it were so easy. We have the entailment to consider, after all.”

“Indeed we do,” Elizabeth murmured. She hated talk of the wretched document that had been held over their heads since they had attended their first assembly. Mrs. Bennet was, of course, completely consumed with the thing, and her greatest purpose in life seemed to be in the search for suitable bachelors, preferably with good fortunes, who would be able to see to her own future—as well as that of her beloved daughters.

The more daughters married and settled, the greater the chance of ease and comfort in her dotage. When Mr. Bennet died—it would be wretched for them all in many different ways, but most of all their mother who would have no one to turn to for support.

For his part, their father seemed not to notice the commotion caused by such matters, and seemed to find a good deal of mirth in the parade of young men who came to Longbourn to seek his approval for an offer of marriage.

“I must confess that I have been thinking about that very thing,” Elizabeth said as they walked down the corridor and down the stairs to Longbourn’s main floor.

“About the entailment? Whatever for?”

Elizabeth sighed heavily. "I cannot quite determine the reason," she murmured. They entered the breakfast room together and Jane pulled the silken cord at the side of the room to alert Mrs. Hill to their presence.

"You should not be thinking of that now," Jane said. "It is your birthday, and tonight the house will be filled with noise, music, and laughter..."

"Far too much noise," Elizabeth grumbled, but her complaint was good-natured. It would be good to have the whole family together under one roof. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner would make the journey from London and would be bringing Mary and her new husband with them. Kitty and her dear children would come from Meryton with her husband in tow... Charlotte Lucas would, of course, be there.

It would be a merry evening, indeed, and she hoped that it would lift her spirits somewhat.

While seeing her sisters after so many months apart would be a wonderful thing, she could not help but worry— What if all of her thoughts, all of her regret, should turn to resentment?

Mrs. Hill bustled into the room with a broad smile upon her face and a fully laden tea tray in her hands. Fresh scones, jam made from the blackberries that grew just beyond the garden gate, and tea that had been sent especially for Elizabeth's birthday from Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner.

The housekeeper was in a jolly mood, and Elizabeth found that she could not maintain any sort of seriousness. Especially as Mrs. Hill set down the tray and gripped Elizabeth's chin gently in her warm hand. "To think, my little girls... All growing up so fast," she exclaimed as she kissed Elizabeth loudly on the forehead.

Elizabeth laughed. "It was bound to happen someday!"

"And all of my littlest ones married and gone away, this house has become so quiet since Miss Kitty's departure. Oh! Mrs. Andrews, now..."

"It has, indeed," Jane laughed.

Elizabeth smiled and helped the housekeeper to set the items she had brought upon the table. It was a song they had heard countless times from the woman, but she had been in service at Longbourn for longer than either of them had been alive, and she did not doubt that it would be quite some time before she ceased to comment on such things.

It was only natural that she would feel a closeness to the family. She was part of them, after all, and Mrs. Hill's own daughter, Margaret, a good deal older than both Elizabeth and Jane, had come and gone from service in the house as well.

Their household was small, but it was a loving one, for all its jostling and shouting.

"But we shall have a merry evening tonight," Jane said brightly. "Kitty and the children will be coming, and Mary will be coming with our aunt and uncle."

Mrs. Hill beamed at them and lifted the empty tray from the table. "I am very well prepared," she said. "And the lamb that I ordered some weeks ago has arrived and looks beautiful already... Speaking of which, I must not leave it in Alice's care for too long... Lord knows what she will get up to when my back is turned!"

The housekeeper walked quickly from the room and Elizabeth and Jane dissolved into laughter. They were very fond of Longbourn's harried housekeeper, and it was no secret that she did not trust the new kitchen maid that had been hired. She had put an iron mark onto one of Mr. Bennet's shirts, and Elizabeth was certain that Mrs. Hill would never forgive the girl.

"Lamb," Elizabeth exclaimed, "how wonderful!"

Jane grimaced and poured two cups of tea. "It was meant to be a surprise," she said. "But no matter, it will not hurt you to know that we shall be enjoying your favorite meal this evening."

"I am overjoyed," Elizabeth replied.

She truly was happy, that could not be denied. But there was something... missing. She knew that with a great deal of certainty as well.

But what it might be, she could not tell.

Longbourn's rooms were only full to capacity on rare occasions. Christmastide, Easter, and, more recently, the birthdays of those daughters who still remained at home.

Mr. Bennet's sixtieth birthday was approaching far more quickly than Elizabeth liked, and there was sure to be a grand party in his honor. She and Jane had spoken of it, briefly, but they were both reluctant to admit that such a milestone was approaching so speedily.

Guests arrived in quick succession that evening, and Elizabeth barely had time to dwell upon her misgivings and doubts as carriage after carriage pulled into Longbourn's courtyard.

Charlotte and her mother arrived in Sir William's best carriage, and Elizabeth could hear the jealousy in her mother's voice as she welcomed them. It could not be helped. Mariah had married well, and Sir William's own fortunes had only increased in recent years. Lady Lucas was a proud woman, but she did not flaunt her wealth as much as Mrs. Bennet liked to complain that she did.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner arrived with Mary, and Elizabeth was delighted to see that Mr. Lark had also been able to pull himself away from his parish just outside London to attend the festivities.

Kitty, her children, and her laughing husband arrived on foot from Meryton, a habit which continually horrified Mrs. Bennet, but seemed to be the only way to ensure that the children would be asleep by the time dessert was served.

Surrounded by her family, Elizabeth had no choice but to be in good spirits. Dinner was a wonderful affair, filled with all of her favorite dishes, several bottles of good wine provided by Kitty's well-connected husband, and a parade of desserts that Lydia overindulged upon when she thought that no one was looking.

"A toast," Mr. Bennet cried over the din of conversation. All eyes turned toward him as he stood from his seat at the head of the table. Her father rarely drank, but Elizabeth was pleased to see her father's cheeks were reddened and his eyes twinkled with mirth as he paused.

"Tonight," he said. "We celebrate the most stubborn of my daughters."

A round of cheers accompanied those words and Elizabeth's cheeks flooded with the heat of sudden embarrassment.

"Papa!" Jane cried.

"Now, now," he laughed. "This is not an admonishment. No, indeed. For if my Lizzy were not as stubborn as she is, she might not be here with us this evening."

"Mr. Bennet you are making no sense," Mrs. Bennet said sharply.

"But I am quite correct," he continued. "For, if our Lizzy was not as she is, we might have lost her to a handsome officer."

Kitty raised her glass and kissed her handsome husband's cheek.

Mr. Bennet laughed and raised his glass in Mary's direction. "Or perhaps a clergyman?"

"I must say that would be almost impossible," Mary said stiffly, but her usually stern husband laughed and Mr. Bennett's smile broadened.

"But she has not succumbed to any such temptation, and so, I may wish my dearest Lizzy, a very happy birthday. Five and twenty. A young woman, indeed."

"Thank you, Papa," Elizabeth said. She rose from her chair and kissed her father's cheek before raising a glass and looking around

the room. "You all do me a great kindness by being here tonight, and I should always wish for such richness in my life."

Wine was drunk, games were played, desserts were eaten, and sleeping children were carried to their makeshift beds before the adults began to retire. Jane went up to bed before midnight, but Lydia stayed up to gossip with her mother, Charlotte, Lady Lucas, and Mrs. Gardiner.

The gentlemen had retired to the drawing room for brandy, except for her father, who had gone, as usual, to his study.

Elizabeth lingered in the parlor doorway until she was certain that she would not be missed. She waited until Mary had begun another of her new sonatas, and then crept down the corridor toward her father's study.

The door was slightly ajar, a signal that they had developed over the years to mean that he was not actually working and that he might be disturbed. Elizabeth had wondered on many occasions precisely how much actual *work* her father actually did during the day, but she could never presume to ask such a thing.

She knocked gently and then pushed the door open and stepped into the study. It was a familiar place for her, and she had fond memories of sitting on the carpet near the hearth to read the books her father kept. Adventures of Greek heroes, dangerous voyages, and some of the truest love she believed could ever exist... she had found it all between the pages of these books.

What need did she have for adventure when she could read of Odysseus, or of Circe's terrible revenge on those who had intruded upon her solitude?

Well, perhaps a little adventure could not hurt.

"Lizzy? Is that you? I had thought you would be in the parlor..."

Mr. Bennet sat in the large leather chair behind his desk, but his ledgers were not open, and a crystal decanter of brandy stood next to a glass in front of him.

"I should be in the parlor," Elizabeth replied. "But I thought I might speak with you first..."

"I am honored," he said with a smile and gestured toward one of the chairs that stood in front of his desk. "Will you have a brandy?"

"I will, thank you," Elizabeth replied. She plucked a crystal tumbler from a table set against the wall and took the seat her father had indicated. He rose from his chair and filled her glass just a little, more than enough, she thought as the dark liquid splashed into the glass.

"To think... My own Lizzy... Five and twenty," Mr. Bennet sighed as he seated himself once more and lifted his own glass in her direction.

Elizabeth smiled and pressed the glass to her lips without taking a sip. Just the smell of the brandy was fortifying enough.

"I know, I should have been married long ago," Elizabeth said.

"And who has said such a thing?" Mr. Bennet asked. She could hear a sharpness to his voice and she loved him for his defence of her, even now when it was not needed.

"No one, Papa," she assured him. "But it has been on my mind somewhat more of late..."

"Nonsense," he grumbled. "You are very happy here, are you not?"

"Of course," Elizabeth said quickly. "But we must think of the future... of Mama. And the entailment."

"Damn the bloody entailment," Mr. Bennet growled.

Elizabeth bit her lip to keep from laughing, but could not stop herself. Her father was terrible at cursing, and while they were all very aware of his feelings about the entail, it was still shocking to hear him speak of it in such a manner.

"Papa... you and I both know that it is something we should all be aware of."

"But not on your birthday, Lizzy, surely."

Elizabeth took a sip of her brandy and winced slightly as it

burned down her throat. "I know," she croaked. "However, it has weighed heavily on my mind."

"Whyever for?"

Her father appeared to be genuinely concerned and Elizabeth's heart squeezed strangely in her chest as she looked at him. To think that she was considering such a thing...

"I believe I should go to Hunsford," she blurted out.

Mr. Bennet stared at her for a moment and then took a long drink of his brandy. When he finally set his glass down he regarded her with a somewhat saddened look in his eyes.

"And why should you like to go to Hunsford?"

Elizabeth set down her glass and folded her hands in her lap. "I believe I should make better acquaintance of Mr. Collins," she said primly.

"Mr. Collins..."

"Indeed," she said quickly. "He will be the beneficiary of this estate, and he has made overtures toward the family that have been, if I may say, ignored..."

"Ignored," Mr. Bennet said incredulously.

"He made an offer of marriage, did he not?"

Mr. Bennet poured another glass of brandy and took another drink before meeting her eyes. "He did."

Elizabeth nodded and took a sip of her own brandy, wincing again as she swallowed. She did not drink brandy often, and she wondered at the fortitude of those who could. "And what answer was made?"

Her father looked at her strangely for a moment and then leaned back in his chair. "He enquired after Jane."

"I see."

"Your sister is in no hurry to marry," Mr. Bennet said. "She is gainfully engaged in her business with Kitty, and I see no reason to rush her into making a decision such as this..."

"But she is the eldest—"

"I am aware."

“Papa...”

“Lizzy.”

Elizabeth stared at her father and met a gaze as equally stubborn as her own.

“Papa... I believe that Mr. Collins’ offer should be re-examined,” Elizabeth blurted out.

“Re-examined? Lizzy, you cannot be serious...”

Elizabeth sat up straight in her chair. “I am serious, Papa,” she said. “Mr. Collins is in need of a wife. Someone whom his patroness will find acceptable and useful... I do not pretend that I intend to find happiness in such a union. But if it would mean the security of our family. And of the entailment—”

Mr. Bennet held up a hand to stop her. “I will not allow it.”

“But, Papa!”

“You will not argue this with me,” he snapped. “I could bear the insult of his proposal. But I could not bear the thought of giving my blessing to such a union.”

Elizabeth picked up her glass and drained the remainder of the brandy without flinching this time. “And I will not endure the loss of this estate to a stranger,” she said firmly. “These things will not matter to you when you have departed this earth, Papa, but they will matter to us. To Mama. Surely, you will want better for us. Surely, you will want someone to have a care for our fortunes when you are gone.”

Mr. Bennet sat in silence for longer than Elizabeth had expected.

His fingers tapped against the crystal tumbler and his thick eyebrows were drawn together in thought.

“I cannot approve of such a thing,” he said finally.

“I know,” Elizabeth replied. “But it is not a matter of approvals. It is a matter of necessity.”

He shook his head. “I do not like it.”

“Nor do I,” Elizabeth admitted. “But it is our only course of action. Would you suggest that Lydia would be a suitable bride?”

Mr. Bennet laughed shortly. "No. No, indeed." He chuckled into his glass of brandy and took a drink. "Could you imagine such a thing?"

"I daresay I could not," Elizabeth laughed.

It was a relief to laugh with her father. She did not like it when he was stern or quiet. His quiet disappointment was more than she could bear.

"Please say that you will consider what I have said," Elizabeth had not wanted to plead with him, but it seemed that she had been left with no other approach.

Mr. Bennet nodded. "I shall consider it most carefully," he said. "But you must not depend upon my answer—" he lifted his brandy glass and swirled the dark liquid gently,—"I may forget all of this in the morning."

Elizabeth laughed and rose from her chair. "Then I will await your decision," she said. "But I am ready, and willing to travel to Hunsford whenever you have made your choice."

Mr. Bennet refilled his glass and waved her away. "We shall see in the morning," he said.

She came around the desk and kissed him on the top of his head and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Happy birthday, my darling," he said.

"Thank you, Papa."

She left him sitting in his large leather chair and set another log upon the small fire that always burned in the hearth, no matter the season, before she chose a book from the shelves and departed the room. This time, she closed the door behind herself, knowing that he would appreciate some solitude after an evening so full of conversation and noise. He loved his grandchildren, of that she had no doubt, but he certainly loved them more when they were quiet. Preferably when they were asleep.

Elizabeth paused in the corridor and listened to the conversation and laughter in the parlor.

"Must you play that boring old concerto," Lydia demanded.

“Play something more exciting. Surely, you have learned some more interesting pieces in London!”

The first notes of a hymn began to play and Elizabeth barely covered her mouth in time to hold back her laughter. Mary and Lydia had always been at odds, and while Lydia teased her endlessly about her marriage to a clergyman, there was no doubt in Elizabeth’s mind that Lydia was jealous of her sisters’ good fortune. They had all thought that Lydia would be the first one made a wife—none of them ever would have guessed that it would be Mary who would be the first to take her vows.

There were no children yet, but the couple seemed happy, and it did not seem as though such a thing could be very far away.

Kitty, on the other hand, had gone to the altar pregnant... But there was very little said about such a thing. She was desperately in love with her officer husband, and he with her, so there was no need to speak of little missteps on the way to marriage. Their house would be full of laughter and love, and Jane was already suspicious that a third child was already on the way.

Elizabeth smiled as Kitty’s laughter pierced the murmur of conversation and she gripped the bannister and began to climb the stairs to the second floor. Jane had been abed for a few hours, but she would rise early to tend to the children. In the morning, the noise and excitement would begin anew, and Elizabeth would have to face the fact that she had made her feelings known to her father.

She would have to tell Jane as well, Jane did not respond well to surprises, and their father seemed to have a penchant for them—mostly to aggravate their mother, Elizabeth suspected, but Jane did not need to be drawn into such dramatics.

She would tell her first thing in the morning.

Perhaps by noon, Mr. Bennet would have an answer.

If all went according to plan, she would write to Mr. Collins and begin to plan her departure from Longborn...

The brandy she had drunk swirled her thoughts and made her chest warm, and Elizabeth giggled to herself as she stumbled on

the final step.

All of that could wait until the morning. She had made far too many important decisions today. Everything else could wait.

August ~ 1816

After her pronouncement, Elizabeth half-expected, and half-hoped, that her father would take time to consider what she had said. But as the days slipped by and life fell into a predictable pattern once more, she began to wonder if he had forgotten entirely.

Early August was almost unbearably hot, and her mother was in a foul mood because of it, but the promise of the regiment's return to Meryton had put Lydia in good spirits.

"Do you think there will be a regimental ball soon?" she asked excitedly. Elizabeth had been so preoccupied with her own thoughts that she had not even considered such a thing. Summer provided a few months of quiet while the regiment was away in Brighton for their manoeuvres, but their return always heralded the return of noise and chaos in the house.

Since Kitty was now married and could no longer act as Lydia's shadow, Elizabeth had presumed that Longbourn would enjoy some measure of peace, but Lydia seemed determined to fill the space all the more, and she took obvious joy in being the center of attention.

"There will, most assuredly, be a ball," Mrs. Bennet snapped. "There are three regimental balls every year, and have been every year that the garrison has been stationed here. You know that very well."

“But, Mama,” Lydia protested. “I was only wondering—”

“Lizzy has brought me an interesting proposal,” Mr. Bennet said suddenly. All eyes at the table turned to him and Elizabeth set down her fork to stare at her father in disbelief. Had he actually considered what she had said to be of some merit? She still had not decided if she regretted bringing it up in the first place.

“A proposal?” Mrs. Bennet looked suspicious but her husband’s small smile dispelled any hope she might have had that he meant anything close to what she hoped for.

“A query,” Mr. Bennet said, “which I have given careful thought. You may have suspected that I had forgotten our discussion... but I have not.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Elizabeth murmured.

“And, while it pains me to say it, I will grant your request. I have written to Mr. Collins and he would be most agreeable to welcoming you to Hunsford—”

Mrs. Bennet slammed her fan down upon the table and stared at her husband with wide eyes. “Mr. Collins!”

“You have heard me correctly, my dear,” Mr. Bennet said dryly.

“Oh, Lizzy, really?” Lydia scoffed. “Are you so desperate?”

“Be quiet,” Mrs. Bennet snapped and then smiled at Elizabeth. “Whatever could have spurred this... change of heart?”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to answer, but her mother plucked her fan from the table and waved her words away before she could speak.

“It does not matter, but I am *very* encouraged by this. Mr. Collins expressed to me on several occasions just how fond he was of you during his last visit. Very fond, indeed.”

Elizabeth did her best not to grimace. Mr. Collins’ last visit to Longbourn had not been a pleasant one, but he had come at a very awkward time and none of them had been at their best. Kitty had been in the final days of her first pregnancy, and Mary’s wedding was hanging over all of them. Mr. Collins’ attempts to speak to Jane were thwarted by Kitty’s need of her, and Elizabeth had been

wrapped up in the plans for Mary's nuptials.

The house had been a disaster, and the parson's presence there had been a surprise to all of them, and an unwelcome one at that.

"I am shocked that he would feel any fondness toward us at all," Lydia muttered. "He is a horrid little man, and I cannot see the—"

"Lydia, that is enough." Mrs. Bennet's voice was sharp and though Lydia laughed, she had the good sense to keep her mirth to herself.

Elizabeth looked down at her plate. Lydia was not incorrect. Her memories of Mr. Collins were not pleasant ones, and Elizabeth was not entirely certain that her plan was one that she would have advised for anyone... especially herself.

"You must leave at once," Mrs. Bennet said. Her attitude had changed into one of businesslike firmness, which did not surprise Elizabeth in the least. If there was one thing her mother was serious about, it was securing an advantageous marriage for her daughters. To whom such things were advantageous for, Elizabeth had not yet determined, but it was certain that this particular match would benefit all of them. If Longbourn remained in the hands of an immediate family member, then, surely, all would be well.

Mrs. Bennet smiled at her husband. "Mr. Bennet you have done very well to encourage such a match. I shall speak to Lady Lucas at once—"

"Whatever for?" Elizabeth blurted out.

Mrs. Bennet looked at her daughter with an expression of bemused surprise upon her face. "You must have a companion for your journey, someone plain and practical so as not to distract Mr. Collins from your presence. Charlotte Lucas will do nicely, I should think. You cannot take Lydia—"

"I would refuse!" Lydia cried. "You cannot take me away from the first regimental ball of the year, Mama, it would be so unfair! Papa, please do not make me!"

“Lydia,” Elizabeth hissed. “Were you not listening? You will *not* be going to Hunsford.”

Lydia’s body slumped with relief and she smiled broadly. “Good. I should have been horrid company on purpose.”

“And Jane will be too busy with Kitty and her children,” Mrs. Bennet continued as though her youngest daughter had not spoken at all. “Charlotte Lucas is the ideal companion for this journey.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth murmured. She had not thought of who might accompany her to Hunsford, but Charlotte would, indeed, be pleasant company for an otherwise unpleasant task.

But she would have to put such things out of her mind. She was traveling to Hunsford for one purpose... and once it was done she could turn her mind to other things.

“I shall write to Lady Lucas today,” Mrs. Bennet said brightly. “Mr. Bennet, you may write to Mr. Collins and tell him to expect Lizzy to arrive very shortly.”

Mr. Bennet inclined his head in agreement, but his gaze flickered to Elizabeth’s as though gauging her reaction to such an announcement. It was all happening very quickly.

Far too quickly, in fact, and Elizabeth was suddenly uncertain of how she felt about her decision to make such a leap. Was she really so desperate to be married?

She did her best to smile and then looked down at her tea. There were no answers in the cup, but it was an agreeable alternative to looking at her mother’s self-satisfied expression.

There was no doubt in Elizabeth’s mind that her mother would turn the situation around to make it seem as though it were *her* influence that had brought about this change of heart.

Perhaps speed was not a bad thing. If she had too much time to think, she feared that she would lose her nerve and ruin everything on purpose. Mr. Collins was not an ideal husband—not for her in any case—but once they were married she could find ways to distract herself.

Mary had found that marriage to a clergyman suited her

perfectly. Mr. Lark spent a good deal of time with his parishioners, leaving Mary alone to practice her compositions and tend to their little house and garden. She seemed very happy, indeed. And while Elizabeth did not know that happiness was in her future, at the very least she might find some solace in her decision to know that her family would be looked after when her father died.

“Wonderful,” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed to no one in particular. Mr. Bennet departed for his study and Mrs. Bennet accepted his kiss upon her cheek with a generous smile. She drank her tea and then excused herself from the breakfast table, calling for Mrs. Hill and her writing box as she swept down the corridor.

Elizabeth sighed heavily and set down her tea spoon which struck the saucer with a dejected *click*.

Lydia leaned over and poked Elizabeth in the ribs. “Do you *really* intend to marry Mr. Collins?” she asked slyly.

“I do not know,” Elizabeth replied honestly. “I cannot say whether or not Mr. Collins will make an offer of marriage.”

Lydia snorted. “Of course he will. Do you not remember how he was when he visited last? He practically tripped over his own feet to ingratiate himself with Papa and he flattered you and Jane endlessly. I believe he would have asked Kitty if she were not prone to giggling like a fool when he looked at her.”

Elizabeth could not be certain whether Lydia was attempting to be cruel, or was just pointing out the obvious. Mr. Collins did not much care which Bennet daughter he married, so long as it was one of them. The man was not very imaginative, nor prone to putting in the required amount of effort that would usually be expected when securing a bride. Affection was not required, only the acceptance of duty.

Duty could sometimes lead to affection, could it not?

Perhaps in some cases, but Elizabeth was not hopeful.

“It does not matter,” Elizabeth said. “Perhaps I will arrive at Hunsford and he will have lost interest in our family altogether. Or his patroness will take some offence at my presence and will forbid

the match.”

“Oh, yes,” Lydia said ominously. “The great Lady Catherine de Bourgh... one mustn’t forget about her. Although I daresay that would be impossible with how endlessly Mr. Collins speaks of her. Perhaps that should be your mission, to cause her Ladyship to like you so much that there would be no question that an offer of marriage should be made.” Lydia frowned for a moment. “Although, if it were me who was forced into being polite to such a horrid example of a man, I should do everything in my power to make the old woman hate me.”

Elizabeth smiled, and then laughed at her sister’s serious expression. She had no doubt in her mind that Lydia would do precisely that.

“And who would ever think to force you into a situation such as that?” she asked.

“If Mama brings one more clergyman to meet me, I shall go mad,” Lydia said crossly. She drank her tea and Elizabeth winced as she set it down too hard in the saucer.

“Have you told Mama that you do not wish to be married?” Elizabeth asked.

Lydia looked thoughtful for a moment. “It is not that I do not wish to be married,” she said. “It is just that I cannot imagine myself not attending balls, or masques, or assemblies because I am too busy looking after my children or attending to a household! I should like to enjoy these things as much as I can before I turn into a boring old woman like Kitty has become.”

Elizabeth could not help but laugh. Kitty was far from a boring old woman, and she had bloomed in her marriage, becoming more herself with each passing day. Lydia could only see that her sister had abandoned her for the affections of an officer with whom she had never exchanged more than two words.

Lydia often boasted that almost every officer in the garrison was half in love with her, but Mr. Anderson had only had eyes for Kitty, and Elizabeth liked him all the more for it.

“Come now, Lydia,” Elizabeth teased. “Do you not wish for a quiet life with children and a handsome husband to dote upon you?”

Lydia made a face. “No, indeed,” she said. “I prefer more excitement in my life.”

There would be no reasoning with her, but perhaps she would see her way to the value in such things soon enough. Elizabeth had been one and twenty when the appeal of such frivolities had begun to wane, but Lydia showed no sign that such feelings might be on her own horizons.

“I did think, perhaps, that I would move to London,” Lydia said suddenly. “Hertfordshire has begun to seem very small and boring when the officers are away in Brighton. And I should like to have excitement all year long.”

Elizabeth began to pile the empty breakfast plates for Mrs. Hill and smiled wryly. “I do not know if Papa will agree to such a thing,” she said.

“Perhaps I do not need Papa’s permission,” Lydia sniffed. She drained the last of her tea and set it down upon the saucer with a determined *click*.

“Lydia,” Elizabeth said warningly, but Lydia had already risen from the table and disappeared through the doorway before Elizabeth had a chance to chide her any further.

“Impossible,” she muttered. Knowing Lydia as she did, Elizabeth had no doubt that her sister might do something foolish if she felt that anyone were standing in the way of what she wanted. When she had been a child it was a frustrating aspect of her personality, but she could be easily reined in because of her youth. But now that she was a young woman, such things were much more difficult.

What a difference five years could make.

Elizabeth placed the dirty dishes, cups, and cutlery upon the tray that Mrs. Hill had left upon the sideboard. Before she left the room, she leaned upon the back of one of the chairs and thought

about all of the merry meals that had been enjoyed there. What would she do when she was mistress of her own house?

Did Hunsford have such a room? Or was the parsonage built for function only, and not ‘frivolity,’ as Mary used to call it. Marriage had brought her younger sister some perspective on the things she used to disdain, and Elizabeth found her serious sister to be much more enjoyable company now that she had been able to spread her wings away from the family.

Perhaps it was not she who had been the problem—perhaps it had been their treatment of her. Mrs. Bennet had always regarded Mary as a disappointment, and it pleased Elizabeth greatly that her mother’s favorite child was still as strident, difficult, and headstrong as ever... and still prone to being a complete embarrassment even as the years passed swiftly by. Mary had done well in her union with Mr. Lark, and Elizabeth truly believed that living well was the very best revenge.

Mrs. Bennet often remarked upon how pleased she was with the marriage, but, though she spoke of it often, she had yet to take the journey to their little house on the outskirts of London, a fact which had not escaped anyone’s notice.

She wondered if her mother would visit Hunsford if she were to marry Mr. Collins—but more importantly, she wondered if she would *want* to receive guests at the parsonage.

“One day at a time,” she murmured. She did not even know if a proposal would be offered, though it seemed almost impossible that it would not occur. Mr. Collins had been keen enough to marry a Bennet sister on his last visit to Longbourn, and from his letter to her father, she suspected that nothing had changed.

She let out a sigh and walked out of the breakfast room with a heavy heart. Her mother would, of course, look to arrange for her departure in a few days’ time, and as she came down the corridor toward the parlor, she heard Mrs. Bennet shouting for Mrs. Hill that she had a letter to be delivered to Lucas Lodge. Lydia’s laughter floated down the corridor and Elizabeth shivered just a

little at the sharpness of the sound.

It had been a vain hope that such a decision would be easily forgotten, and now she would have to manage the consequences of her actions with as much grace as possible. Convincing Mr. Collins of her sincerity would be the most difficult part of it all.

She could live without the very deepest love, it was not a requirement for any marriage... Perhaps she could even be happy.

Instead of joining her mother and sister in the parlor, Elizabeth turned, instead, for the stairs. If her mother was so intent on having her leave for Hunsford, she should be prepared. Charlotte would, of course, agree to accompany her, and Elizabeth had no doubt that their departure would be planned with haste.

She glanced at her father's closed study door and then climbed the stairs toward the bedchamber that she shared with Jane. Though, with her elder sister so often away from the house it already felt as though she had been left behind.

Mrs. Bennet often exclaimed over the quiet in the house, but for one who had been so invested in the speedy marriage of her daughters, it seemed like a hollow complaint.

She would pack a valise for her journey, and hope that it would be a short visit. Mr. Collins was not one to waste time, and Elizabeth did not doubt that the pressure from his patroness had lessened as the years had passed. If his continued bachelorhood was any indication, he had done little to advance his efforts in that respect, something which must have bothered Lady Catherine greatly. She would be thrilled to hear that there was interest once again in his many attempts to gain favor at Longbourn.

Elizabeth had resigned herself to the task at hand, and pulled dresses from the wardrobe that would be best suited to spending time with a clergyman. Low necklines were avoided, longer sleeves and covered shoulders were preferred... And certainly no thin material. With autumn's approach, such things were not practical, and she had a feeling that practicality would be a trait that was highly prized in such circles.

A parson's wife should be practical, orderly, and, above all else, modest.

Elizabeth pulled another drab day dress from the wardrobe and made a face at it. She would have to do some repairs and re-hemming to her older gowns, but that would take up the time she would otherwise have spent having to listen to her mother talk endlessly of Lydia's prospects and what Mr. Collins might say during his proposal.

For once, she relished the quiet that had settled over the house. On any other occasion it would have felt heavy and oppressive, but on this particular day, one far too full of reflection, the quiet was comforting.

She pulled her sewing box from under her bed and settled herself in a chair that had been set by the window. Mending would take her mind off things... at least, she hoped that it would.

As Elizabeth had expected, Charlotte agreed to accompany

her to Hunsford with great enthusiasm and Mrs. Bennet began the planning for their departure with all haste.

Even though Elizabeth had been packed and ready to leave for two days, she still felt unprepared when the carriage rolled into the courtyard. Sir William had offered to accompany them so as to take the opportunity to do some business in London; he would see them safely to Hunsford and then go about his work in the city.

Elizabeth had half-hoped that she and Charlotte would be able to take the mail carriage so that they could speak more privately, but there would be no argument made for such a thing. Sir William had grown more pompous with his newly acquired titles, and, as such, would not hear of his daughter traveling that distance in such a manner.

Mrs. Bennet was always effusive in her farewells, and this occasion was no different.

“Now, Lizzy, I shall expect that you will write to me every day,” she said briskly. “And I daresay you shall not return to Longbourn without having secured a proposal!

“Mama,” Elizabeth said as her cheeks warmed with embarrassment. In the carriage, Charlotte covered her mouth to hide her laughter. “I shall return at the appointed time, as discussed.”

“And not a moment sooner,” Mrs. Bennet said firmly. “Unless,

of course, you have accepted a proposal, then you must come home at once so that we might begin our planning for the wedding with all immediacy.”

This time it was Lydia who laughed aloud and Elizabeth pulled away from her mother’s grasp and turned toward the carriage.

“Your father believes as I do,” Mrs. Bennet called after her. Elizabeth doubted such a thing very much, but her father was not present to argue with her. Mr. Bennet had gone into Meryton on important business, and though they had spoken the night before, Elizabeth wished that he had stayed to bid her goodbye.

“I must go,” she said quickly as she kissed Lydia’s cheek.

“I do hope you are not too bored at Hunsford,” Lydia said. “I cannot imagine that supper at Rosings Park will be very much fun. A stuffy old woman at the head of the table... I should think that every dish will be smothered in tasteless gravy, or be served dry as a bone with too much salt.”

She giggled at her own imaginings and Elizabeth smiled briefly before she walked quickly to the carriage.

“Take care and remember what I have said,” Mrs. Bennet called out as Elizabeth climbed into the carriage. “A letter every day!”

“Surely, not every day,” Charlotte said with a smile as Elizabeth settled herself on the seat opposite her.

“I do not think so,” Elizabeth replied. She waved to her mother and younger sister and Sir William thumped his cane against the ceiling of the carriage to alert the driver they were ready to depart.

She greeted Charlotte father warmly and leaned back against the plush cushions. This was, certainly, a more comfortable way to travel, and she was grateful to have such generous friends.

“A wonderful idea, this visit,” Sir William said as the carriage turned onto the road that would take them through Meryton and on to London. “Wonderful, indeed. Her Ladyship is particularly well connected in London, and I do not doubt that this will be a very good match for any young woman.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth murmured. She was slightly embarrassed

that Sir William should know enough to comment on such things, but it should not have surprised her that Lady Lucas would have made all of the particulars of the visit known to him.

Charlotte glanced at her father but then turned an encouraging smile to Elizabeth before she pulled a book from her valise. It would not be a long journey to Hunsford, but it would be a quiet one. Elizabeth nodded and pulled out the novel she had brought with her as Sir William's head began to nod and his eyelids drooped.

She opened her book and tried to think of anything that did not involve Mr. Collins and her possible future as the wife of a parson... she could not even imagine such a thing, and yet, here it was before her, looming like a storm cloud over the fields to the south of Longbourn.

Longbourn. That should be her focus. She was undertaking such a task out of a sense of duty to her family. And that was what it should be. A duty. Nothing more, nothing less.

The words on the page blurred slightly and Elizabeth blinked back the tears that threatened to give away the selfishness of her true feelings. She could not give in to her desires—especially as they involved jumping from the carriage and running away into the hills, never to see the like of Mr. Collins again.

A ridiculous notion, certainly, but one that Lydia might have entertained to avoid such a fate. The thought brought a smile to her face and she tried once more to read the words upon the page in front of her.

“I am happy to see you smile,” Charlotte whispered.

Elizabeth glanced up at her friend and then looked down at her book once more. She could say nothing of her true feelings, not now, but perhaps she would be able to confess all to Charlotte once they arrived in Hunsford. There would be time enough then, surely.

Sir William's gentle snore filled the carriage and Charlotte chuckled softly and turned a page in her book. Elizabeth looked

out the window at the ripening corn in the fields they passed. Late autumn harvests were on the horizon, and winter would follow hard upon its heels. Perhaps by Christmastide she would have some good news for her family... Perhaps by Christmastide she would have come to some kind of acceptance of her new place in the world.

Their arrival at Hunsford was somewhat less overwhelming than Elizabeth had expected. As the carriage pulled up to a small wooden gate, a woman in an apron and cap rushed out from the house to meet them.

"I do apologize Miss," she cried as Elizabeth and Charlotte stepped down from the carriage. "Mr. Collins is at Rosings with Lady Catherine... he did not know when you would arrive and did not want to keep her Ladyship waiting!"

"Of course," Elizabeth said. She was somewhat dismayed at such a greeting, but the woman was pleasant enough and it was not her fault that she had been left to tend to such things. However, it was also strange that Mr. Collins would feel so bound to his duties to Lady Catherine that he would leave someone in his place to greet them.

"I am Mrs. Farthing," the woman continued. "Her Ladyship sends me to the parsonage to see to Mr. Collins' meals and cleaning."

"Indeed, it is lovely to meet you," Elizabeth said. "Miss Lucas and I will be—"

"Come now," the woman said, "inside... I have a chicken in the oven for supper. Mr. Collins should return at any moment."

Charlotte and Elizabeth bade a swift goodbye to Sir William, and once the footman had taken their valises into the parsonage,

the carriage rolled out of the drive and turned back toward London once more.

They followed Mrs. Farthing into the house and the housekeeper directed them to the rooms that had been prepared for them before she bustled back toward the kitchens.

“A strange reception,” Charlotte murmured.

“Indeed, I did not know what to expect, but it was nothing like this,” Elizabeth agreed.

“It is very obvious that Mr. Collins is in need of a wife, if only to keep his household in order.”

Elizabeth looked at her friend in surprise as they climbed the narrow stairs to the second floor. “Would you expect that a wife should undertake these duties?” she asked. “Cooking and cleaning?”

“I could not say for certain,” Charlotte replied. “My mother does not do these things, and she did not do them before my father was granted his titles... we have always employed housekeepers and kitchen staff. Would your own mother be expected to do such things?”

“Not if my father wanted the house to remain intact and his supper to be served unburnt,” Elizabeth laughed.

Charlotte shook her head and joined in Elizabeth’s mirth. “I believe my mother would be abysmal at such things, too. Mariah and I were taught some aspects of managing a household, but I daresay I would be hopeless for the first months... perhaps even a year. I would need the guidance of an experienced staff to feel comfortable with any tasks... How does one even prepare a chicken?”

“I wish I could say,” Elizabeth replied. She had watched Mrs. Hill in the kitchen and marvelled at her skill with potatoes and paring knives, but she could do more herself than cut apples for pies... “I could not imagine being expected to do such things. Accomplishment in other subjects aside, I do wish that there had been some emphasis placed on such things...”

“But your drawing is excellent,” Charlotte said. “And your French—”

“Will not assist me in the running of a household,” Elizabeth said with some chagrin. “I shall, however, be able to give instruction in two languages...”

Charlotte laughed and they walked together down the corridor to the bedchambers that had been made ready for them. Charlotte chose a small room that had been set with a flowered coverlet, and Elizabeth the second room with blue flowers in a vase and a bright window that overlooked the parsonage gardens.

The house was a good deal smaller than Longbourn, and Elizabeth took a deep breath as she set her valise down upon the bed. Perhaps such a change would be good for her. Management of a smaller house would prepare her for the work needed to keep Longbourn in order when the time came.

It had become clear to her as she grew older that Mrs. Bennet benefitted from Mrs. Hill’s care and experience when it came to the running of the household. Mrs. Hill could be trusted with accounts, hiring staff, and seeing to the purchase of foodstuffs and supplies for the kitchens.

Jane had taken over the same duties in Kitty’s household, which left Elizabeth feeling somewhat out of place in her own home. She had expected her mother to assign her some duties, but it seemed that there were none to delegate and Elizabeth had nothing to fill her days except reading, walking, tending the gardens, and writing endless amounts of letters.

She would have to hire a new housekeeper for the parsonage, unless Lady Catherine determined that Mrs. Farthing should remain to give her some guidance as to what the household required. The thought of being expected to cook made her feel slightly ill, but she was certain that she could manage anything that might be required. Well, not entirely certain, but she could try.

She unpacked her valise and selected a simple dress and a

shawl to keep out the chill that seemed to have settled over the house even though the late summer sun was warm on the windows.

There was no fire laid in the hearth, and Elizabeth determined that she would ask Mrs. Farthing about having one set.

“Lizzy! Lizzy, Mr. Collins is coming.”

Charlotte’s voice floated down the corridor and Elizabeth went to the window and pushed aside the gauzy curtain to see for herself. Dressed in black with his usual hat shoved down over his slicked black hair, Mr. Collins was, indeed, coming toward the parsonage with a determined gait and Elizabeth hurried to make herself presentable.

“Are you ready?” Charlotte asked. She waited in the doorway, her cheeks were slightly pink and her smile was one of eager anticipation. Elizabeth pulled her shawl over her shoulders and smiled at her friend. She had not expected Charlotte to be so eager for this meeting, but she was pleased to have her friend’s support in such a matter.

They descended the stairs together and found what must have been the parlor. It was a sparsely decorated room located near the front of the house, and looked over the gardens and the path that led from the gate at which they had arrived a short time ago.

“I shall see if Mrs. Farthing will make us some tea,” Elizabeth said. She left Charlotte seated at the table and went in search of the kitchens.

The clatter of pots and crockery was her guide and she noted the location of the dining room, and a room stuffed with large books that could only be the parson’s study. The kitchen door stood open and Elizabeth knocked gently upon the door frame to alert the woman to her presence.

Mrs. Farthing’s smile was broad and warm and Elizabeth felt comfortable in her presence.

“I apologize for interrupting you, but would it be possible for you to bring us a pot of tea?”

The other woman frowned slightly. "Tea? So close to supper? Mr. Collins will have just come from tea with her Ladyship... Lady Catherine would never take tea so close to supper."

"I realize that," Elizabeth replied, surprised at the woman's opposition to her request. "But Miss Lucas and I have been traveling for several hours and we should like some refreshment before supper."

"As you like," the woman huffed. "Won't be a moment."

Elizabeth thanked her and returned to the parlor. She did not tell Charlotte of the housekeeper's reluctance to prepare tea for them. It was unimportant, but she wondered if Mr. Collins, or Lady Catherine for that matter, would see it as such.

"What was your first impression of Mr. Collins," Charlotte asked. "I have quite forgotten... he was introduced to us so quickly during his last visit and I had not thought of him since."

"He is a very... practical sort of man," Elizabeth said haltingly. "He has a great deal of respect for his patroness, and I do not doubt that has changed in the years since our last meeting."

"Indeed, with Rosings Park looming over the parsonage, I could not imagine it would be an easy task." Charlotte pointed out the window and Elizabeth turned to see what had caught her attention.

Sure enough, the brick facade of Lady Catherine's estate was visible through the trees and seemed to hover over the landscape. The late afternoon sunlight shone off the windows that Mr. Collins had been so eager to describe on his last visit, and Elizabeth wondered how long it would take for him to mention them once more.

"No, indeed," Elizabeth murmured. Lady Catherine's presence could be felt very strongly in the parsonage, from the furnishings to the pictures that hung upon the walls... and she wondered fleetingly how much of a presence her Ladyship would have in the parson's marriage.

Through the window, Elizabeth could see Mr. Collins approaching; his footsteps churned up small clouds of dust on the

dirt road and at the sight of his broad smile she suddenly felt that she had made the wrong decision.

Mrs. Farthing bustled into the room and set a tea tray down upon the table. It was a meager offering, with only a few small biscuits and a teapot that appeared to only be large enough for two cups of tea.

“Lovely,” Charlotte said warmly. “Thank you, Mrs. Farthing, I am famished.”

Elizabeth resisted the urge to laugh. The small plate and teapot were meant to be a protest, that she had been coerced to provide it against her will and against the wishes and rules that her Ladyship had set out. The housekeeper’s smile was thin, and she left the room without saying anything in return.

Charlotte poured tea and Elizabeth held her cup gingerly as Mr. Collins opened the gate and hurried down the path toward the house.

“How are you feeling?” Charlotte asked quietly.

“I—”

Elizabeth did not know how to answer, but as Mr. Collins’ loud greeting filled the foyer, she was grateful that she did not have to lie to her friend. She had dreaded this moment, and felt that dread even more keenly as Mr. Collins stepped into view and swept his hat from his head.

“Cousin,” he said joyfully as he made a low bow. “And Miss Lucas, welcome. You are both very welcome. If I may say, Cousin Elizabeth, you are more beautiful now than when I first saw you—When your father wrote to me to tell me of your impending arrival, I went at once to Rosings Park to tell her Ladyship the wonderful news. ‘Collins,’ she said, ‘I very much desire to make acquaintance of this young woman, you will bring her to me at once that I may speak with her!’” Mr. Collins smiled broadly and Elizabeth suspected that she should take such a pronouncement as a compliment.

“How wonderful,” she said. “You are very kind to invite us, and

to accommodate Miss Lucas as well.”

“It is my pleasure. Any friend of my cousin, is, indeed, my friend as well. You are both very welcome.” He eyed the teapot and plate of biscuits with some suspicion and Elizabeth felt the urge to explain its presence.

“Mrs. Farthing was kind enough to bring us some tea. We were hungry after our journey, but did not want to spoil our supper...”

“Indeed, not,” Mr. Collins said. “Lady Catherine always says that moderation is the highest compliment one can pay to their own person. Overindulgence, she says, is the last comfort of the weak. One must strive to push away such things in order to appreciate what has been granted by position and one’s own fortunes.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said softly. What he had said made no sense, but Charlotte nodded gravely and set down the biscuit she had already taken a bite out of.

Ridiculous.

Lydia would have burst out into laughter at such a pompous declaration, but Elizabeth could do no such thing. She took a sip of her tea as Mr. Collins pulled a chair out for himself and sat down at the table.

“Now, as you may have guessed, her Ladyship has been gracious enough to extend an invitation for us all to take tea at Rosings Park tomorrow.”

He said the words with the expectation that they would be met with some enthusiasm and Elizabeth did her best to smile. “How wonderful.”

“Wonderful, indeed. You have scarcely been in Hunsford for three hours, and already an invitation has been made. If her Ladyship would honor us with an invitation to supper, then we can be assured that her favor for this union has been secured.”

Mr. Collins beamed at her happily, and Elizabeth was reminded instantly of why she had refused to become better acquainted with the parson on his last visit to Longbourn. His incessant snobbery

and slavish devotion to his patroness was decidedly unappealing, and as Mr. Collins began to speak of the improvements and details of the parsonage that had specifically come under Lady Catherine's personal scrutiny, Elizabeth wondered if her Ladyship would be consulted on all matters when it came to life in the parsonage.

She may not have known how to run a household, but she did not relish the idea that she would have to pass all decisions through the lens of her Ladyship's approval or disapproval. Or if she would have a choice in the matter.

Supper at the parsonage was unexpectedly quiet as Mr.

Collins retired to his study to continue the work on his sermon, which Lady Catherine had been pleased to offer her thoughts on over tea.

“I shall labor to make it perfect,” he said as he brandished the ink-stained paper bearing her Ladyship’s somewhat cramped handwriting.

“We shall not keep you from your work,” Elizabeth said with a smile that she hoped he would see as genuine though it was anything but.

She and Charlotte enjoyed a quiet supper in the dining room and though Elizabeth wished that she could tell her friend of her true feelings about the situation, she did not feel that she could share them—not yet.

“Tea at Rosings Park,” Charlotte said. “How grand that should be.”

“I daresay it will be,” Elizabeth agreed. Tea at Lucas Lodge was much finer than the ones they enjoyed at Longbourn, but she could only imagine how much more would be expected of them at Rosings Park.

“Do you think that Mr. Collins would often retire to his study for supper?” Charlotte continued. She seemed very curious about the parson, and what life at Hunsford might look like. Elizabeth

had not given the topic the same consideration, and she appreciated that Charlotte was interested in such things, it served to remind her of why she was here in the first place.

“He seems to be very dedicated to his parishioners,” Elizabeth said. “I should think that his schedule would be attuned to their needs, as well as those of his patroness... Especially around holidays and special observances.”

“Indeed,” Charlotte said.

“Mary has spoken of a similar pattern with her own husband. She has been able to use her time alone most judiciously and her pianoforte playing has improved considerably since her marriage.”

“And what would you bend your hand to if presented with the same situation?” Charlotte asked.

It was a simple enough question, but Elizabeth found that she could not think of an answer.

“What would you do?” Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte took a sip of wine and paused to consider the question. “I had not given such a thing much thought,” she said. “I had always imagined that I would be busy with children, or the management of a household the size of Lucas Lodge... but the parsonage is small. Perhaps the gardens, or the decorating of the house. It seems that her Ladyship has offered a great deal of assistance in this area.”

Elizabeth nodded. “A more youthful touch would, indeed, have a pleasant effect on the house...”

“Though I would not imagine that there is a good deal of money available for such things.”

“Nor would I,” Elizabeth agreed. “And I would not doubt that Lady Catherine would be called upon to approve every purchase and request...”

Charlotte frowned at the remains of her supper. “That is very true.”

“We do not know what sort of person Lady Catherine might be,” Elizabeth said. “Perhaps we may be surprised at how

accommodating she is.”

“Indeed, I do hope so,” Charlotte said. “It would be terrible to be at odds with one’s patroness.”

“Especially with the knowledge that one’s husband would hold her opinion very highly.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Charlotte said with a smile. “Compromise is the key to a happy marriage.”

Elizabeth laughed. She could not imagine what kind of compromises Lady Lucas had made in her own marriage, but she could only guess that any marriage that included Lady Catherine’s supervision in the bargain would not be one that included an equal sort of compromise. She had a feeling that all of the compromise would be on her shoulders.

Elizabeth woke early the next morning; she was stiff from travel and the bed was uncomfortable. She always slept poorly in strange settings, and she did not know how long it would take her to become comfortable at the parsonage.

She dressed as practically as she could. Rosings Park was a fine house, but it was most likely populated by large rooms that would be difficult to heat properly, even in the summer, and she did not have any intention of shivering through what was already promising to be an uncomfortable visit.

When her hair had been pinned into place, Elizabeth left her chamber and went down the stairs to the main floor of the house as quietly as she could. The house was silent, and she was grateful to be the only one about.

She walked through the house and examined the rooms more closely. Mr. Collins’ study was unoccupied and she was able to look at the books on the shelves more closely. Bibles, books of prayer,

examinations on the Gospels... no novels or books of poetry to be seen. She wondered if Mr. Collins did any other reading aside from that which related directly to his own work.

There were some smaller books on gardening, which was a small spot of brightness. Perhaps there was something to his character aside from the needs of his parishioners. She resolved to ask him about the gardens over supper.

That could be a topic she could find an interest in, surely.

“Cousin!”

Elizabeth almost dropped the book she held as Mr. Collins appeared in the doorway.

“Whatever are you doing?” he asked.

“I do apologize,” Elizabeth choked out. “I was merely—”

Mr. Collins’ smile was tight as he pulled the book out of her hands and replaced it upon the shelf. “It is no matter, we must depart for Rosings at once.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth replied. *Was it really time for tea already?*

She glanced at the clock on the mantle and realized that it was still very early.

“Her Ladyship does not like to be kept waiting, and we there is no time to request the carriage—if I remember correctly you enjoy walking?”

“I do, indeed,” Elizabeth said.

“We shall have to leave a note for Miss Lucas to explain our absence,” he said as he ushered Elizabeth from the room toward the foyer.

“Should I change my attire?” Elizabeth asked desperately. She did not want to leave without Charlotte, but Mr. Collins would not be deterred.

“No, indeed, my dear. Her Ladyship is most accommodating when it comes to plainer manners of dress. She will appreciate your modesty in this situation, but embarrassment is not necessary.”

Elizabeth was not embarrassed, but she did not say so. Arguing

any point with Mr. Collins seemed useless.

“Of course,” she murmured. She pulled her shawl over her shoulders and pulled her bonnet from the hook by the door.

Mr. Collins strode ahead of her, and Elizabeth rushed to catch up with him, tying the ribbon of her bonnet under her chin as she went.

“Come now, Cousin,” Mr. Collins said without looking at her. “Lady Catherine does not tolerate tardiness for any reason.”

For a man of his stature, the parson’s steps were long and Elizabeth struggled to keep pace with him.

“Mr. Collins, might I ask what her Ladyship might expect of me?”

The parson turned to look at her briefly before continuing on. “One might expect that Lady Catherine de Bourgh would be strict in her deportment and unwelcoming to those of a lower social standing, but you shall find that she is as generous in the company she keeps as in the time she gives to a person such as myself.”

Elizabeth bit her lip to keep from making a face. She was quite sure that Lady Catherine was not inclined in the slightest to make any accommodation for those of a ‘lower’ social standing. As the daughter of a country gentleman, she, herself, was a member of an acceptable sort of social class. But that was, undoubtedly, where her Ladyship’s generosity ended.

“Your deportment and manners will be very much appreciated by her Ladyship,” Mr. Collins continued. “She will ask you questions about your family, many of which I have already answered for her.”

“How kind,” Elizabeth murmured. The road rose in elevation and even though she walked every day, she found it difficult to keep pace with Mr. Collins, who seemed very eager to reach their destination.

Elizabeth looked back at the parsonage and wished that she had woken Charlotte, her friend would have been able to provide enough of a distraction that she would not feel so out of place.

Socially, the Lucas family was better placed than her own, and Lady Catherine would have, no doubt, been very interested in such things.

It would have been a different feeling entirely to come to Rosings Park with no thought of having to impress her Ladyship, but Elizabeth needed to do just that. It was not enough that she had made a decision to consider Mr. Collins for a husband, she would also have to convince Lady Catherine de Bourgh that she was well suited to be the wife of a parson.

As they walked, Elizabeth sought to distract herself with the scenery. Autumn was well on its way on the grounds of Rosings Park, and the leaves of the poplar trees had already begun to turn. There would be snow by late October, surely.

As they had seen from the parsonage, Rosings Park loomed over the trees and imposed itself upon the landscape. Where other great houses seemed to be enveloped by the surrounding land, Rosings Park was a stiff and imposing silhouette— Elizabeth had always believed that a house reflected some of the personality of its owner, and she did not doubt that Lady Catherine de Bourgh would be as unyielding as the house she resided in.

“Ah, you see there, Miss Elizabeth, how the light catches the windows! I do not feel that my description of it does true justice to the marvel of them!”

Mr. Collins pointed up at the house and Elizabeth looked obediently in the direction he indicated. Sure enough, the high windows that had been one of Mr. Collins’ favorite topics of conversation during his last visit to Longbourn were a spectacular sight... but they were, after all, just windows. Windows that would require cleaning, and that were most likely quite draughty in the winter months.

“Spectacular,” Elizabeth said. She hoped that her tone was not as flat as it had sounded in her own ears, but she could do nothing about that now. Mr. Collins seemed not to notice, and his smile was broad as he looked back at her.

If nothing else, it was fortunate that the parson was so blinded by his own enthusiasm for Rosings that he would notice little about what she said. She would have to be more careful with her words when speaking to Lady Catherine. Her Ladyship would, no doubt, be more alert to such nuances.

Elizabeth had never seen an entrance as grand as that of Rosings Park. Even Mr. Collins' effusive descriptions of the house had not done justice to the size of the solid wooden doors, or the size of the stones that had been used to create it.

As they approached, the massive door swung open and a footman in a crisply tailored jacket and highly polished boots greeted them with a formality that bordered on stiffness.

Mr. Collins' enthusiastic greeting was met with a brief twitch of a smile.

"Her Ladyship is in the north parlor," the man said loftily.

"Very good, thank you," Mr. Collins replied with more eagerness than Elizabeth had expected. The footman held out his hand to Elizabeth who tugged desperately at the ribbons of her bonnet and then handed it to the man.

"Your shawl, my dear," Mr. Collins said briskly.

"Oh, yes, of course," Elizabeth said. Her cheeks warmed slightly as she laid her shawl over the man's proffered forearm. She had hoped to keep it with her, as she could feel that the air in the house was a good deal colder than the outdoors.

Mr. Collins' smile was broad as he led Elizabeth through the corridors of the house, and she did her best to peer into the rooms that they passed, but his pace was quick enough that she was not given much opportunity to pause. Each room seemed larger than the last, and she caught glimpses of graceful furniture, patterned rugs from abroad, and trailing ferns and flowers on almost every surface.

A nightmare of dusting and cleaning. She could not imagine living in a house with so much space left unused.

"How many are in her Ladyship's family?" she asked as they

turned down another corridor.

Mr. Collins turned to her and smiled, though his pace did not slow. "Rosings Park is home to Lady Catherine, and her daughter, Anne," he replied. "Though several other members of her family do visit from London at holidays."

"Of course," Elizabeth murmured. *Only two of them, in a house so large? What useless extravagance.* Longbourn had begun to feel similarly since Kitty and Mary had departed to begin their own lives, and she wondered if her mother thought of such things.

"Her Ladyship employs a large staff to see to the cleaning, cooking, and service of the house," he continued. "Lady Catherine has also condescended to providing the parsonage with a housekeeper... for the time being, of course. But her Ladyship has assured me that her support will always be available should the woman who agrees to be my wife wish to have such assistance. 'Collins,' she said to me, 'see that you choose a woman who is a useful sort of person that can provide not only for the happiness of your home, but also the organization and care of the parsonage itself. Find this woman and bring her to me so that I may decide for myself whether or not she is suitable.' Wise words, do you not agree?"

"Indeed," Elizabeth said, for she did not know what else to say, and her Ladyship's pronouncement, through Mr. Collins' voice, seemed to be more of a threat than words of wisdom. Although it was obvious that Mr. Collins had not realized it.

"Ah, this drawing room is one of the jewels of Rosings Park," Mr. Collins said as he gestured toward an open door at the end of the corridor. "And you shall see why—the aspect of the windows overlooking the poplar trees is an especially pleasant one, especially as the seasons turn... I have often, very humbly, remarked to her Ladyship that it is one of the most calming rooms in the house..."

Elizabeth smiled thinly and did not doubt that her cousin would have a similarly flattering opinion on every room in the house.

Elizabeth expected him to pause so that she could enter the room before him, but the parson's pace did not slow as they neared the door.

She folded her hands together as she stepped into the drawing room and was surprised to see a young woman sitting alone in the room.

Mr. Collins seemed similarly surprised and he bowed to her quickly. "Miss Anne," he said. "Will her Ladyship be joining us?"

The young woman looked up from her book and sighed heavily. "Mama received a letter that she was very eager to answer without delay," she said. "She will join us when she is finished."

"Did she say so?" Mr. Collins pressed.

Miss de Bourgh blinked at him and then looked back down at her book. "She did."

"I see."

The parson seemed out of sorts without his patroness present and Elizabeth tried not to smile at his sudden awkwardness.

"I have brought Miss Elizabeth Bennet to meet her Ladyship," he continued.

"How nice." Miss de Bough's voice was quiet and steeped in boredom and exhaustion. "You may ring for tea if you like. Mama wanted me to wait, but you are here now..."

"Of course." Mr. Collins fairly leapt at the chance to be of use and he rushed to the side of the room to ring the bell for tea.

"Please, take a seat," Miss de Bourgh said. She did not look up from her book and Elizabeth did as she was asked and selected a chair close to the small fire that burned in the hearth. The room was cold, as she had expected it would be. The ceilings were too high to be able to heat it properly.

Elizabeth noticed, with some chagrin, that the room was situated on as pleasing an aspect as Mr. Collins had described. The poplar trees had already begun to turn, and the view was of a marvelous patchwork of changing colors—green to russet, and brilliant gold.

“I believe I shall see if her Ladyship has need of my assistance,” Mr. Collins said suddenly. “Miss Elizabeth, I shall leave you in the company of Miss de Bourgh. I will return with her Ladyship.”

Elizabeth could only smile briefly as the parson rushed from the room. Miss de Bourgh did not look up from her book and Elizabeth took a breath as silence settled over them.

“My mother tells me that Mr. Collins is considering you for his bride,” Miss de Bourgh said suddenly.

Elizabeth’s cheeks warmed slightly and she shifted in her chair.

“I suppose he is.”

Miss de Bourgh glanced up from the pages of her book. “Why would you ever want to be the wife of a parson?”

Elizabeth folded her hands in her lap and considered her options. She could lie to the young woman and speak as her mother had instructed her, or she could be truthful.

She decided on the latter.

“Truthfully, Miss de Bourgh, I had not considered it at all.”

Anne’s eyebrow rose slightly.

“Two of my sisters are married and gone away from the house,” Elizabeth continued, “and the third is often away helping my younger sister with her children.”

Anne closed her book and turned her eyes to Elizabeth and she saw a spark of genuine interest in the young woman’s expression. *She could not be any older than Lydia*, Elizabeth decided. She should not have been shut away in a grand house so far away from society. *Why was she not yet married?*

“How many sisters do you have?” Anne asked eagerly. “I have longed for sisters for so many years...”

“There are five of us,” Elizabeth said with a smile. The young woman across from her seemed so eager, almost starved, for some kind of connection. “Jane, the eldest is still unmarried, but she is so often away from home... Kitty is married to a bright young officer, and she has two young children. Mary found a clergyman that she could not stop talking to... it was quite remarkable to see.

And Lydia, the youngest, is still at home... but I do not think she will be married very soon. She enjoys being the center of attention far too much.”

“How wonderful,” Anne breathed. All of her stiff pretence was gone, replaced with an almost childlike enthusiasm for whatever Elizabeth might want to tell her. “But why would you want to marry a clergyman?” she asked again. “And to come to Hunsford?” She made a face and Elizabeth laughed.

“Mr. Collins is the beneficiary of the entailment upon our estate,” Elizabeth admitted. “When my father— If I have the opportunity to be of help to my family after his passing, then I should not like to pass it by.”

“That is very practical of you,” Anne said, but her expression was somewhat melancholy as she said it. “You are of an age where you might choose your own husband, are you not?”

“I am.”

Anne sighed heavily. “My mother arranged my marriage before I was four years old. I have no choice...”

“Surely, she would take your wishes into account if you truly dislike the gentleman.”

Anne shook her head. “It is not that I do not like him, he is quite tolerable, and very wealthy. My mother approves of him, that is all that truly matters.”

“I do hope that is not *all* that matters,” Elizabeth said gently.

“Perhaps. When mother and father were married they had only known each other for five days. Their marriage had been arranged since my mother was a girl.”

“But did they love each other?”

Anne’s expression was non-committal. “I have not asked. Father died when I was young, and my mother does not speak of him.”

“I see.”

“And Mr. Collins,” Anne said brightly. “Do you have affection for him?”

“I—” Elizabeth’s words were frozen in her throat. She could not

answer the young woman honestly. She did not have any affection for Mr. Collins. Their marriage would be one of duty only... Perhaps she might grow to have some care for him, but at the present moment she merely tolerated his presence as a necessary step toward securing a legacy for her family. If such a thing grew to include affection she would be very surprised, indeed. But it was not impossible to believe that it might be so... a desperate thought, to be sure.

A maid entered the room carrying a tray laden with tea, plates of scones, and small jars of jam, which effectively removed the need to answer Anne's question. She could also hear Mr. Collins' voice in the corridor and an older woman's sharp reply to a question she could not quite hear.

Anne's mouth pressed into a thin line. "Mother is coming," she said. "She will want to hear all about your life in... where is it that you are from again? I know that Mr. Collins has made mention of it."

"Hertfordshire," Elizabeth said with a smile as the maid poured two cups of tea and then left them alone in the room once more.

"Oh, yes, of course," Anne said. "I shall not forget again."

"Ah, your Ladyship is too kind. I shall apply your advice to my own garden immediately..."

"See that you do," a lofty voice replied. "With the approach of autumn, one cannot be too careful with dahlias... They are a most temperamental flower, which is why they are among the most prized in my own gardens."

"So true, there is no other reason why they are so admired."

Elizabeth sat up straight as a tall woman entered the room. The skirts of her dark silk gown swept over the carpet and her pale eyes were cold as they met Elizabeth's.

She rose from her chair and curtsied as her Ladyship strode by.

"Tea? Who asked that tea be delivered in my absence?" she snapped.

"I did," Anne replied softly. "Miss Bennet and I were left alone,

and I thought it would be—”

“The maid should not have brought it.” Lady Catherine sank into a grand chair far away from the fireplace and glared at the teapot as though it had insulted her with its presence.

“Your Ladyship, may I present my cousin, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She has come here from Hertfordshire—”

“At my request, of course,” her Ladyship said in a bored tone. Elizabeth did not know quite how to react to the other woman’s scrutiny, or her obvious disdain for her presence.

“Miss Bennet is the second oldest of five sisters,” Mr. Collins continued as though her Ladyship had not interrupted him at all.

“Are they currently living on the estate that you will inherit?” she asked without looking at him.

“Indeed we are,” Elizabeth replied to the question she had not been asked. She detested being spoken of as though she were not in the room, and Lady Catherine seemed to have a penchant for just such a thing. “Longbourn has been my home, our family’s home, for three generations.”

“I see. And do you not have any brothers?”

“No, ma’am,” Elizabeth replied. “Four sisters and myself.”

Her Ladyship’s cold gaze was immovable. “And are they not all married and gone away?”

There was judgement in the question, but Elizabeth could not give herself permission to rise to the challenge implied in her tone. “They are not, my Lady. Two are married, one is acting as governess and housekeeper, and the other has not been able to pull herself away from the dance floor to seek a husband just yet.”

“And yourself?” Lady Catherine asked. “You are seeking a husband?”

“I—”

Lady Catherine waved her toward her chair and accepted the cup of tea that Mr. Collins had poured and prepared for her while they were speaking.

“I have often told Mr. Collins that a parson should, indeed,

have a wife. One that would increase his own personal happiness, and be a helper to him in his work. Are you a helper, Miss Bennet?"

Elizabeth's mouth was dry, and she did not know how to answer such a question. She should have realized that she would be subjected to such a barrage, but she had not expected the violence of its beginning. Lady Catherine was a formidable woman, and she would be a terrifying opponent—but she seemed as though she would be a fearsome ally as well. But Elizabeth doubted that one could even be certain that she *was* an ally.

"I like to think that I am," she replied after a moment.

"Mr. Collins is very involved in his parish... And he would expect you to be so as well. Are you a woman of steady faith, Miss Bennet?"

"I—"

"Mother, really," Anne said softly. "She need only be ready to manage a household. Surely, you do not expect her to be putting out hymnals and baking bread for the parishioners..."

Lady Catherine's glare shifted to her daughter, but Anne did not seem to mind.

"I am quite prepared to look after a household," Elizabeth said, seizing upon the opportunity to change the subject. "Although I will require some assistance from Mrs. Farthing—until I fully understand what is required of me."

"Indeed, you will." Lady Catherine sipped her tea and Mr. Collins perched upon the edge of one of the chairs. "And what are your accomplishments, Miss Bennet? Do you play pianoforte?"

"Quite poorly, I am afraid," Elizabeth admitted. She could not lie about such things. There would be nothing worse than to profess to be proficient in one thing and then be called upon to perform it and fail utterly. Such were the things that haunted her thoughts.

"And singing?"

"I am not a lark," Elizabeth said with a smile. "Though I have

been told that I am not unpleasant to listen to..." That, thankfully, was true. She had a passable voice, but had been long out of practice.

"I see."

"I am passably skilled at French," she said quickly. Better to take control of this examination rather than sit back meekly while she was examined like a horse about to be sold for breeding stock. "My drawing is not as I should like it to be, but I am determined to amend that over the winter months. I do love gardening—"

"A useful accomplishment," Mr. Collins said brightly. "As the gardens at Hunsford are one of my little indulgences."

"Indeed," Lady Catherine said. "And household accounts. Have you any experience with those?"

"No, your Ladyship, I do not," Elizabeth said. "But I am more than willing to learn. With the right instruction..."

"How old are you, Miss Bennet?" The question was sharp and Elizabeth blinked in surprise.

"Five and twenty," she replied.

Lady Catherine shook her head. "To be unmarried at such an age, and to have so little accomplishment... and no experience with the running of a household. Did you have a governess when you were young?"

"No," Elizabeth said flatly.

Her Ladyship blinked incredulously. "No tutors?"

"No, ma'am," Elizabeth replied. "We were very much encouraged to develop our accomplishments as we saw fit. My sister Mary is devoted to her pianoforte practice, and Lydia's dancing is wonderful."

"I see."

Elizabeth was painfully aware that she was not faring well. Her Ladyship's questions seemed designed for a young woman of a completely different background.

"And what of your father," Lady Catherine asked. "Does he come to London often?"

“Oh, no,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “Papa dislikes London very distinctly. He prefers the quiet of Hertfordshire over the crowded street of the city. My uncle, however, is very happy in London.”

“And what is his profession?”

Elizabeth paused for just a moment. Her uncle’s work was respectable, he rented warehouses for his trade goods, and their house was comfortable and warm and located in a good area.

“He is a merchant trader, your Ladyship,” she said finally. “Imported goods from abroad.”

“I see.” Lady Catherine’s words were as frosty as her eyes, and Elizabeth could not determine whether her answer had been met favorably or not.

“How wonderful,” Anne said brightly. “To think of all of those marvelous items coming to England from so far away.”

“You think too much,” Lady Catherine said sharply.

Anne did not seem hurt by her mother’s tone. “I should like to see a warehouse one day,” she continued. “It must be dreadfully exciting to watch the ships being unloaded.”

“I should be pleased to take you to see my uncle’s warehouses,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

“Alas. Anne is too sickly to take on such a task,” Lady Catherine said firmly. “I would not have her walking about a port like some wharf rat. Disease riddled sailors on every corner. Unthinkable.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to argue, but it did not seem worth the effort. Mr. Collins was already in quick agreement, and Anne seemed to have shrunk back into herself as her mother blazed ahead.

“What an exciting family you have, Miss Bennet,” Lady Catherine said dryly. “A pity that you are not yet married.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said.

“An issue which I shall hope to remedy,” Mr. Collins said. His smile was broad and meant to be reassuring, but Elizabeth felt sick as she looked at him. His life was small, and taken up with the

parsonage, his parishioners, and, of course, Lady Catherine de Bourgh and all of the dramatically charged air around her.

Elizabeth returned his smile, and she hoped that he could not see the struggle that it took to accomplish it.

She picked up her teacup and dared to take a sip of the tepid liquid. She could manage to drink cold tea without complaint, anything to distract from the situation at hand. Anne de Bourgh seemed sweet and unburdened, but Lady Catherine was a formidable sort of woman and Elizabeth did not relish her scrutiny, something which would, no doubt, continue if she were to become Mrs. Collins.

After their tea, Mr. Collins stayed behind to speak to Lady Catherine about the upcoming Michaelmas services which would take place at the small parish church over which he presided. Elizabeth was more than grateful to make the return trip to the parsonage on her own. She was eager to reveal all of what she had learned to Charlotte, who would, no doubt, have some perspective upon it all.

Anne accompanied her to the door and waved from the top step as Elizabeth walked down the gravel path toward the road that would lead back to the parsonage.

She was curious, however, about the gentleman to whom Anne had been engaged. She was not given the opportunity to ask any questions, but perhaps Mr. Collins, who seemed to know everything about the de Bourgh family, would know the answer.

He could be a member of any number of well-born, well-monied families who could trace their lineage back to the first Saxon pilgrims that had inhabited the country. Or even farther in France or Germany. Whoever he was, he would be wealthy, have a staggeringly expensive education that would, no doubt, have included a Grand Tour of the Empire—or at least the interesting parts of it.

For Lady Catherine, or her husband, to have approved such a

gentleman, he must be very worthy. And probably catastrophically boring.

Whoever he was, Elizabeth did not envy him the mother he would acquire along with Anne's inheritance. It seemed far too steep a price for a man with any sense, but she did not expect that there was much sense to be had in those circles. No matter what anyone said, Elizabeth was certain that wealth and influence were not guarantees that one might be a good person.

She had only known Anne de Bourgh for a short time, but she hoped that the young woman would find some happiness in her eventual marriage, but that seemed as unlikely as Lydia agreeing to marry a clergyman.

Elizabeth laughed softly and pushed open the garden gate that led through the parsonage kitchens. She could see Charlotte in the parlor, and Elizabeth was suddenly famished. She had been too tense to eat while at Rosings Park, and if she had, Lady Catherine would certainly have had something to say about it.

Charlotte's steady company would be a welcome palate cleanser after such an experience.

As Elizabeth came through the kitchen door, the scent of freshly baked bread tickled her nostrils and she smiled to know that it would accompany their supper later that evening.

Mrs. Farthing had gone back to Rosings for the afternoon, but she would return closer to supper to prepare whatever food Lady Catherine had been generous enough to spare from her own kitchens. These were the things that she would have to consider... meals. The cost of produce... It was all so overwhelming.

She prepared a tea tray as quickly as she was able and loaded a plate with the sweets and pastries that Mrs. Farthing had denied them the day before. No one could be unhappy when there was a fresh raspberry tart upon their plate.

She lifted the tray and went in search of Charlotte and an outlet for her frustrated thoughts. If this was what it would be like to be mistress of Hunsford, she did not know whether she would be able

to manage it without something to distract her from the reality of the marriage that would accompany it.

A marriage of convenience was not a simple undertaking. She had thought that she would be up to the task, but the more Elizabeth thought about it, the more she worried that she would never be able to pretend that such a thing was enough to make her happy.

T heir days at Hunsford passed quickly, but Elizabeth felt as though each day dragged on longer than the last. If Lady Catherine had been displeased with her, it was not evident from the invitations to dine at Rosings that arrived on neatly penned invitation cards delivered by increasingly irritated looking footmen.

If Mr. Collins were to be believed, Lady Catherine, it seemed, had found Elizabeth's candor quite charming— "In a common way," Mr. Collins had explained. "This is not to say that her Ladyship does not enjoy the diversion of your conversation, no, in fact, she said to me just the other day: 'Collins, I do very much desire that you should come to tea as often as possible so that I may properly assess Miss Bennet's fitness as a partner.'"

Mr. Collins had seemed very pleased to deliver this compliment, and Elizabeth could only smile and thank him for relaying such an uplifting message. But as invitations to dine continued to arrive, Elizabeth found that Lady Catherine's attentions had shifted to Charlotte. It made perfect sense, after all, Charlotte's family was better placed in Hertfordshire society, and Charlotte was a practical, and accomplished young woman who did not shy away from duty.

If anything, Elizabeth felt a sense of relief that she was able to speak to Anne de Bourgh all the more. Her initial impressions of the young woman seemed to be true. She was a sweet girl, a year

younger than Lydia, who wished that she could attend balls and assemblies in London instead of languishing at Rosings Park.

She also wished, very much, to be married.

“Mother wants to wait until my health has returned,” Anne confessed over dessert one evening, “but with winter on the way, I fear that I shall have to wait another year to have my prayers answered.”

“Does this mysterious gentleman come to visit you often?” Elizabeth asked.

Anne smiled and her cheeks pinkened with embarrassment. “Sometimes. He is very kind, and speaks to me often about what books I am reading or which music I have learned to play on the harp or the pianoforte... He will be coming for Christmastide this year.”

“Wonderful,” Elizabeth said with a genuine smile. “I do hope that you will not have to wait too much longer to have your wishes granted.”

“As do I,” Anne giggled.

Later that evening as they climbed into the carriage that would take them back to the parsonage, a gentleman on horseback rode up the drive. A footman dashed forward to take the horse’s reins, as the gentleman swung out of the saddle and jumped to the gravel.

“Ah, Lady Catherine’s nephew has finally arrived,” Mr. Collins said. “If you will excuse me, I must go and greet him.”

He smoothed down his hair with the flat of his hand and walked quickly to the gentleman and bowed low. They spoke only briefly, with Mr. Collins undertaking the lion’s share of the conversation upon himself. Elizabeth could not hear their words, but she could only imagine the praise that Mr. Collins was speaking of Rosings Park and her Ladyship’s generosity or some other characteristic that he had decided to laud on that particular day.

“A nephew,” Charlotte said with interest. “Do you think this is

the gentleman that is to marry Miss de Bourgh?"

Elizabeth frowned briefly as she beheld the gentleman. In the waning light of the early evening she could see how his dark hair curled over the collar of his jacket, the fine cut of his vest, and the high sheen on the leather boots he wore. There was an arrogance in his eyes that she did not like, and he seemed to barely tolerate Mr. Collins' attentions. The parson gestured at the carriage and the gentleman's gaze burned into Elizabeth's. She nodded quickly and wondered what Mr. Collins had said about her. The gentleman, it seemed, did not care to make his acquaintance of them, and strode across the courtyard at a quick pace as soon as he was able to extricate himself from the conversation.

Mr. Collins returned to the carriage with a wide smile upon his red face and as he settled back into his seat she wondered what thoughts were flashing through his mind.

"How wonderful, I cannot even say," Mr. Collins said brightly. "Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy has come all the way from Derbyshire to visit his aunt. He is in London on business, and could not stay away. The lure of Rosings Park will not be denied, even to those in possession of fine estates of their own."

Of course he would see the visit as a compliment to his patroness, for how could it be anything else?

"How long will he stay?" Charlotte asked.

Elizabeth's eyebrow rose slightly. Charlotte seemed to ask Mr. Collins a great deal of questions, and encouraged his discussions on whatever topic he might have felt inspired to speak about at supper, or over tea, or at breakfast... Elizabeth found it all very tedious, and somewhat strange that Charlotte should be so invested in something that did not concern her in the slightest.

But, perhaps, there was something more to it.

"He will stay until September," Mr. Collins said. "From there he will be traveling on with a dear friend, whose name escapes me, but that is only because I have not had the pleasure of meeting him just yet. Although I do hope to rectify that as soon as may be

possible.”

There was no doubt in Elizabeth’s mind that this Mr. Darcy was the gentleman to whom Anne would be married. Well connected, well monied, and approved for the match on the very virtue that he was already a member of the family. What a simple solution, indeed.

“What is the reason for the delay in Anne’s marriage,” Elizabeth asked as the carriage rolled toward the parsonage.

Mr. Collins looked thoughtful for a moment. “Her Ladyship is not confident that her daughter is well enough to bear the stress of a marriage,” he said with some hesitation. “Although I have explained to her on many occasions that it would be best for Miss de Bourgh to experience the happiness of the state of matrimony before—”

“Before what?”

Mr. Collins blinked in surprise. “Before she is too old,” he said. “Miss de Bourgh will reach her one and twentieth birthday this coming February, and while I have every confidence that I will perform the marriage ceremony before then...” Mr. Collins’ voice trailed away and Elizabeth wondered what had stopped him from speaking further on the subject. During any other conversation it was almost impossible to keep him from speaking, but now he was oddly silent, and Elizabeth was not certain how to feel about this sudden change in his demeanor.

“Then it is a good sign, indeed, that Mr. Darcy has come,” Elizabeth said.

Mr. Collins looked perplexed. “Why might you say that, Cousin?”

“If they are to be married... Miss de Bourgh told me that their marriage had been arranged since her childhood. Surely—”

“Oh! Oh, my dear, no,” Mr. Collins laughed. “Mr. Darcy is, indeed, very well placed to be a suitable match for Miss de Bourgh, but I can assure you that he is not the gentleman in question. Although, I will say that I did make precisely that suggestion to her

Ladyship not so many years ago.”

Elizabeth nodded and looked out the carriage window. She did not know why, but she was suddenly very tired of this conversation, and, indeed, any conversation that began with, or mentioned, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Charlotte continued the conversation, but Elizabeth continued to look out the window as the parsonage came into view. Sunset had painted the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks, and the outer wall of the parsonage glowed sweetly in the waning light.

She missed Hertfordshire, and the truth of the matter was that she could not be happy here. The combination of Mr. Collins, his work, the household, and the overwhelming presence of Lady Catherine de Bourgh was proving too much for her... and it was no longer possible for her to say that she could endure such things.

If she was deeply in love, Elizabeth knew that she could bear any manner of challenges that were placed in her path. But without that most basic of needs, every task seemed insurmountable—even a small thing such as what meal to request for supper would have been overwhelming for her.

The carriage pulled to a stop in front of the parsonage gate and Elizabeth opened the door before the footman could jump down to assist them. She walked through the gate and into the house without waiting for Charlotte or Mr. Collins. She would write to Jane that evening.

Her mind was made up. It was time for her to leave Hunsford and whatever consequences might come with that decision... she would face them bravely and with a different sort of conviction. She knew now that she had come to Hunsford prepared to sacrifice certain things about herself—but it had become clear to her that there was much more to be sacrificed at Rosings Park than she was willing to part with.

The following morning, Elizabeth sat in the breakfast room with her letters beside her. As soon as she was able, she would ask for Mrs. Farthing to see to their delivery. Charlotte sat across from her, but she seemed overly distracted.

“Whatever is the matter, Charlotte?” Elizabeth asked kindly as she poured another cup of tea. “You have been very quiet this morning. It is not like you!”

Charlotte’s smile was somewhat uneven as she accepted the cup Elizabeth passed to her. “You are quite correct,” she said and then busied herself with the preparation of her tea. After a moment, she set down her spoon and placed her palms flat against the tablecloth. “Lizzy, there is something I wish to say to you,” she said finally.

Elizabeth laid down her own spoon and gave her friend her full attention. “Of course, what is it? Is there something amiss? Did you receive a letter from Lucas Lodge?”

Charlotte shook her head. “No, indeed. That is to say, I did receive a letter from Lucas Lodge, but it contained no bad news at all. Only good news.”

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief. She had had only one letter from her sisters since her arrival at Hunsford, but she had not expected more. Lydia did not write letters unless it was demanded of her, Jane was far too busy, and Mrs. Bennet did not want to have a letter until Elizabeth had secured her engagement and could share the news with the whole family.

But Elizabeth had not received a proposal. In fact, Mr. Collins seemed not to be interested in such things at all.

“It is about Mr. Collins,” Charlotte began.

Elizabeth’s brow rose in surprise. “Mr. Collins? Did he say something that offended you? It is not like you to allow such a thing to pass... should I speak to him on your behalf?”

“Oh, no, Lizzy. Thank you. Mr. Collins has made me an offer of

marriage.”

Elizabeth’s elbow knocked into the teapot, and sent it skidding across the table. Tea slopped onto the tablecloth and she scrambled for a linen napkin to sop up the liquid before it spread too far.

Charlotte jumped up from her seat and began to move plates and cups out of the way. They gathered up the tablecloth together and held it between them as they edged toward the kitchen and Mrs. Farthing’s washing tub.

The linen tablecloth was deposited into the tub and lay there in a dejected lump, much like the one that was forming in Elizabeth’s stomach.

They stood in the kitchen and Elizabeth pressed her palm to her forehead. “I do apologize, Charlotte,” she said breathlessly. “It was an accident...”

“There is no need to apologize,” Charlotte said gently. “I am certain that my words came as quite a shock.”

“But the proposal... Did you give him an answer?”

Charlotte’s eyes were wide and shining as she nodded. “I have.”

“Oh, Charlotte...” It was obvious enough that her friend had accepted the proposal and Elizabeth did not know whether to be overjoyed, or feel that she had been cheated out of her opportunity to help her own family... but perhaps it was her own fault, after all.

“You are not cross with me, I hope,” Charlotte said in a rush and Elizabeth shook herself out of her stupor and embraced her friend.

“No! No, indeed,” she choked out. “I am overjoyed for you.” She pulled back and looked at her friend seriously. “Do you think you will be happy here at Hunsford?”

Charlotte looked thoughtful, and then smiled. “It is as you said yourself,” she said. “I do not know if I will be able to find happiness, but perhaps I might find a measure of it in the work to be done. Affection may grow over time. And I respect Mr. Collins a good deal for his dedication to his parishioners and the de Bourgh family...”

“Her Ladyship will be looming over your every decision,” Elizabeth said warningly, but Charlotte laughed.

“I believe I will appreciate all the guidance I may be given,” she said. “I know almost nothing about running a household, but with some patience, I will learn.”

Elizabeth could not begrudge her friend some happiness. Her life had grown more and more unfulfilling as time had passed, and Elizabeth had watched her once vibrant friend fade away into the background at balls and assemblies. The eldest daughter, forgotten and pushed aside while Lady Lucas looked for a husband for her younger daughter... What happiness could Charlotte have hoped to find in Hertfordshire? Her prospects were much the same as Elizabeth’s, save only for the fact that the Lucas family were better connected socially, and Sir William spent as much time in London as possible.

“You must promise that you will come and visit every Christmastide,” she said. “Or at least in the summer months when it is most pleasant in Hertfordshire.”

Charlotte smiled and embraced Elizabeth tightly. “I shall promise it most heartily,” she said.

Tears pricked at Elizabeth’s eyelashes and she blinked quickly to keep them at bay for she did not know whether the tears were ones of joy for her friend, or of sadness for herself. But the tightness in her chest might have been a relief... To know that she would not have to pretend to some affection for Mr. Collins that she did not feel had lifted a weight from her shoulders that she had not realized she was carrying.

What a misery her life might have been had Charlotte not stepped in and snatched away her opportunity—

But her opportunity for what? Mr. Bennet might live many years, yet. She would have to spend all of them with Mr. Collins as mistress of Hunsford until that fateful day came.

But now it was Charlotte who would become the mistress of Longbourn. Elizabeth could almost hear her mother’s howls of

anguish as Charlotte released her from their embrace and wiped at her own cheeks.

“My mother will be so happy. She had given up hope that I might find a husband. I had almost given up hope, myself.”

Elizabeth squeezed her friend’s hand and smiled, a genuine smile this time. It was impossible not to be happy for Charlotte, and this was no time to dwell upon her own selfish hurts. There would be time enough for that later.

Charlotte draped her arm around Elizabeth’s waist as they walked back to the breakfast room.

“Your letters,” Charlotte exclaimed as they passed through the double doors. “We should make certain to ask Mrs. Farthing to take them into town for us.”

“Yes, of course,” Elizabeth said. “But I shall have to write another, I have just remembered that I forgot to write one for Jane.”

She had not forgotten, of course, but her reason for writing had changed very suddenly, and she wanted to correct it immediately.

“I had thought to return to Hertfordshire in a few days’ time,” Elizabeth continued. “But I do not suppose that you would wish to depart so soon?”

Charlotte’s cheeks pinkened slightly. “No, indeed,” she said. “I think I should like to stay on a little longer, if you would not mind?”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth laughed. “I shall suffer through Mrs. Farthing’s excellent cooking and the fine meals we are served at Rosings Park if it means that I shall see you smile all the more.”

“I shall endeavor to do so,” Charlotte promised.

Elizabeth only hoped that she could do the same, the thought of returning to Longbourn without a proposal, and with yet another hope for future security pulled out of her reach. Not to mention her mother’s reaction to the news of Charlotte’s engagement. Suddenly, she was not as eager to return to Hertfordshire as she had thought...

As the days passed, Elizabeth took to walking to keep her distracted from the crushing weight of the melancholy that threatened to envelop her. She had decided, quite soon after Charlotte's revelation of her engagement news, that her despondence was of the selfish variety.

She had not truly wished to marry Mr. Collins, not for the right reasons, and thus, the sadness and loss that she felt was of a different variety than she had expected. She did not begrudge Charlotte her engagement, not in the slightest. If anything, Charlotte was in more dire need than she of a husband.

Mr. Collins, for his part, seemed more pleasantly surprised by the 'violence of his affection' for Charlotte, as he was wont to describe it. The couple had taken to walking in the morning, so that Charlotte might become better acquainted with Rosings Park and all that the parsonage, and her Ladyship's patronage, had to offer.

It was on one of those very same morning walks that Mr. Collins decided to explain what had happened.

"I had thought, Cousin, that it might be you and I who would be walking to the altar," he admitted one morning, "but I confess that I must give Lady Catherine de Bourgh all the credit she is due for the turning of my affections."

Elizabeth bit her lip to keep from saying anything that she might regret, and only nodded in reply. Mr. Collins, as usual, did

not notice her silence and continued to speak in a bright tone.

“‘Collins,’ she said to me, ‘I have seen what each of the young ladies who have come to Hunsford have to offer, and I declare that Miss Lucas is, indeed, the woman who would be the most suitable wife for you!’”

He turned a beatific smile toward Charlotte who walked a few paces away.

“How fortunate to have her Ladyship’s guidance in such matters,” Elizabeth said quietly.

“Fortunate, indeed,” Mr. Collins said. “For as soon as she made mention of such a thing did I realize how correct she truly was. As I have always said, Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s opinion, and her judgement of the true character of a person has always been a quality that I greatly admire...”

“Of course.”

Elizabeth did her best to keep her expression neutral, the implied disdain of Lady Catherine’s judgement was, of course, lost on the parson. And, once again, Elizabeth could not fault Charlotte for her role. She had come to Hunsford as Elizabeth’s companion... it could not be helped that she had discovered an affinity for the place that Elizabeth could never feel.

Although, at the back of her mind, she wondered if Charlotte might have mentioned something of her feelings... Or, perhaps, said something of her own ambitions. Had she been so wrapped up in her own search for meaning that she had forgotten to see the very same signs in her dearest friend?

She sighed heavily and smiled at Mr. Collins. “I am very happy for you, sir. And happy for Charlotte.”

“You are too kind, Cousin,” he said and then hurried to catch up with Charlotte to continue their walk.

However, after a few minutes, Elizabeth found that she could not keep a sedate pace, nor could she listen to Mr. Collins’ one-sided conversation any longer. The urge to run into the woods that bordered the parsonage grounds was too strong to ignore, but she

could not bring herself to give in to such childish desires. Running away from one's problems was never helpful.

Instead, she veered away from the path and walked up the hill toward Rosings Park. Mr. Collins and Charlotte seemed not to notice, and Elizabeth relished the opportunity to be truly alone for she felt as though she had been under scrutiny for far too long. Even at the parsonage, in the bedchamber she had been given, she could not truly give in to her feelings, even the selfish ones, for fear of being overheard and then questioned about her wellbeing in the morning.

The tears that pricked her lashes as she marched up the gentle rise toward the looming walls of Rosings were ones of frustration and anger.

What was she to do now?

The edge of her Ladyship's gardens was filled with bright flowers, the dahlias she spoke of with such pride and vigor, and Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at their jaunty colors and charming placement.

She turned away from the garden to look down over the rolling fields that led down to the parsonage. A small grove of apple trees hugged the south side of the parsonage property, and she could see the white flowers of Mr. Collins' rose bushes which followed the fencing in front of the parsonage.

Charming. Horribly charming.

She laughed softly at the ridiculousness of her anger and wiped at the tears that had spilled over her cheeks. Foolish. She was a foolish girl to be crying over such a thing.

"Miss Bennet?"

A gentleman's voice pierced through her thoughts and Elizabeth turned in surprise, her cheeks burning with embarrassment to be found. To her even greater shock, the gentleman standing on the other side of the garden bed was Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.

They had only been met briefly, over a supper where he spoke no more than three words to anyone and only nodded politely

when they were introduced and bowed when they departed the house.

“Mr. Darcy,” she choked out. “Whatever are you doing here?” As soon as the words left her mouth she felt inordinately silly. It was she who was intruding upon the grounds of Rosings Park—his aunt’s home. “That is to say—I did not expect—”

The gentleman chuckled softly at her discomfort and then smiled, but the expression was all too brief. “I did not mean to startle you,” he said. “But I looked out the window and saw a figure in the garden... I do apologize for intruding. If you would like to be alone—”

“No, no. I thank you. I should return to the parsonage... Good day to you.”

Elizabeth had wanted to be alone, so desperately, but now that he was here, she did not feel right asking him to leave. If anyone should be leaving, it should be her. She turned away, but he surprised her by speaking again.

“I hear that Miss Lucas will soon be Mrs. Collins,” he said.

Elizabeth’s hands closed into fists at her sides, and she turned to face the gentleman once more. Her smile felt tight as she tried to decide what to say in reply.

“She is, indeed. Next spring, I should think. Perhaps sooner if her Ladyship decides that such a thing might be possible.”

Mr. Darcy’s expression was unreadable, and Elizabeth found herself feeling more nervous that she had said something incorrect or impolite. She was angry with Lady Catherine, but her nephew need not know about it.

“I have no doubt that she will,” Mr. Darcy said. “My dear aunt has an opinion on every topic.”

Elizabeth allowed herself to smile, but only for a moment.

“What connection do you have to Mr. Collins?”

“Oh,” she was taken by surprise by his question. “He is... well...”

“I had heard from my aunt that Mr. Collins was set on making

an offer of marriage to you.”

Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open as she stared at him. “I beg your pardon, sir—”

Why was he speaking to her in such a casual manner, and of things he should not have known. Or, more correctly, things he should not have been speaking to her about. They were strangers, after all.

“I do apologize if I have offended you, it is only—” he smiled quickly, “—you must be relieved that he has made an offer to Miss Lucas, instead.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks burned hotly. “I must take my leave, do excuse me.” She turned away from the gentleman and walked as quickly as she could to the edge of the gardens where the path that led down to the parsonage began.

“Miss Bennet,” he called after her, but Elizabeth did not slow her pace.

Boots crunched over gravel as he pursued her, and she glanced over her shoulder just in time to see him leap over one of the garden beds to land in the lush grass.

“Miss Bennet, please wait. I really must apologize—”

Elizabeth whirled around to face him. “I do not know you, sir, and yet you have gone out of your way to cause me distress in no less than three minutes of interaction. Whatever you have to say, I do not wish to hear it, and I bid you a good day once more.”

She tried to turn away again, but the gentleman’s hand touched her elbow and she froze in place.

“I do apologize. Most sincerely,” he said softly. “Have you seen the gardens? It is a pleasant walk on a day such as this, and I daresay you look as though you need some time to compose yourself before returning to the parsonage.”

Elizabeth took a quick breath and considered her options. If she returned to the parsonage now, she would have to explain where she went and why, and Charlotte would be able to see that she had been crying. Alternatively, if she walked with Mr. Darcy, she might

discover more about the young man Anne was to marry, and it would give her time to organize her thoughts about everything else... or at least she could attempt such a thing.

"Thank you," Elizabeth said. "I did come here to clear my mind... I did not expect to have company."

The gentleman smiled and gestured for her to follow him, and Elizabeth did so, but with a quick glance over her shoulder to be certain that Mr. Collins and Charlotte had not yet noticed her absence.

The couple had disappeared behind the parsonage, and Elizabeth reasoned that they might not have minded being alone. The thought of being alone with Mr. Collins in such a way was enough to prompt an involuntary shiver which Mr. Darcy noticed at once.

"Are you cold, Miss Bennet?" he asked.

"No, no, indeed," she said briskly. "But I should like to walk in the sun a little... Autumn seems to be very eager to arrive this year."

They turned to the gardens and walked on in relative silence. Mr. Darcy pointed out certain flowers or trees that his aunt was especially proud of, but otherwise, there was only a companionable silence between them and Elizabeth began to feel somewhat guilty for her anger at him.

"I should not have spoken as I did," Mr. Darcy said suddenly. "I had not observed your..."

So, he had seen the evidence of her tears and the redness of her eyes.

"It is no matter," she said. "You were... you were only asking out of curiosity."

"Will Miss Lucas be happy at Hunsford?"

A curious question.

"I do hope so," Elizabeth said. "Although I cannot speak for Charlotte, only that I think she would be very well suited to the task of being a parson's wife."

“And what will you do now?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I shall... I shall return to Longbourn.” There was nothing more to say about it. Not to a gentleman, in any case. Her mother would lament and moan about the loss of the estate to the Lucas family and would, no doubt, blame Elizabeth for her failure to secure a proposal.

“But I hear that there will be a marriage in Rosings Park’s future as well,” Elizabeth said to change the subject.

“Indeed?” The gentleman’s eyebrow rose slightly.

“Miss de Bourgh’s engagement,” Elizabeth said. “Surely, there will be an announcement made soon?”

“Ah. The long-standing threat of engagement. My aunt has spoken of it for many years, and yet poor Anne still waits for such a thing to come.”

Elizabeth frowned slightly. “It seems cruel to wait for so long.”

“My aunt is not known for her kindness,” he replied.

Elizabeth looked at him in surprise, but the gentleman’s words had been said with no rancour. His comment had been more of an observation than a judgement and Elizabeth found herself wondering more about who this Mr. Darcy was in his private life.

“Will you spend Christmastide here at Rosings?” Elizabeth asked, for she did not know what else to say.

“No, indeed. I have plans to spend the holidays with a dear friend. He has just taken over a country estate and has invited me to join him. I had originally thought to journey to the American colony.”

“The colony?” Elizabeth blurted out. “But it is so far to go... and I hear nothing but news of unrest and lawlessness—”

The gentleman chuckled. “All very much untrue. I have assurances that nothing could be further from the truth. I had hoped to expand my own prospects abroad, and if an opportunity presented itself... I promised myself that I would take it.”

“How thrilling,” Elizabeth murmured. She only knew what her father had told her of the American colony. Its war and its struggle

for independence from the crown was the topic of much conversation in her father's circles, and her uncle had often spoken of his fondness for the tobacco traders who operated out of Virginia.

How wonderful it must be to be a man of means who could make such decisions on a whim... She would have given anything to be able to do the same.

"Your connection to Mr. Collins," Mr. Darcy said, "was it a strong one?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Oh, no. He is a relation of my father's. Mr. Collins is in possession of an entailment upon our home, and he will inherit our estate when he passes."

"I see."

"When you spoke earlier of a relief that Mr. Collins had proposed to Miss Lucas, I was angry... for this now means that my family will be dependent upon the favor of a relation which we barely know."

"And you had hoped to alleviate this pressure with a marriage?"

Elizabeth's cheeks burned once more, but this time with frustration more than embarrassment. She should not have been speaking about such things with a gentleman. Especially one that she did not know. It was improper... decidedly so.

"I had." She looked toward the parsonage and made a decision. "I do apologize, Mr. Darcy, but I shall have to end this conversation. I really must depart. Mr. Collins and Charlotte will wonder where I have gone."

"Of course," he replied after a moment's surprise. "I should not have kept you from your destination."

"Good day, sir," she said quickly.

"Miss Bennet... May we speak again?"

Elizabeth paused and then felt a flood of warmth in her chest. "I should like that very much."

The gentleman bowed shortly and an answering smile tugged at

the corner of his mouth before disappearing. "Good day, Miss Bennet."

With determined steps, Elizabeth strode away from the gardens and down the path that led toward Hunsford.

She had never spoken so candidly with anyone she did not know... especially not a gentleman. But for a reason she could not fathom, the conversation had not felt improper. In fact, she had felt more than comfortable speaking with him, and would have continued to do so if she had not remembered the impropriety of it all. It was enough that they had been alone and unchaperoned in the garden. Her mother would have been furious.

Elizabeth pressed her palms to her cheeks and felt the heat of her face through the fabric of her gloves. She would certainly need time to calm herself before stepping back into the parsonage to face Charlotte's questions.

They were to take supper at Rosings Park that evening, and Elizabeth needed to be prepared to sit across the table from Mr. Darcy, and face Lady Catherine's continued scrutiny. Though her Ladyship's focus had turned to Charlotte, Elizabeth would still feel the sting of her questions, and the implied judgement that accompanied them.

There were only a few short weeks remaining in her time at Hunsford. In a way, it felt far too long. And in an unexpected turn, it somehow did not feel like enough.

September ~ 1816

Much to Elizabeth's dismay, her time at Hunsford passed

with a speed she had not anticipated. Her daily walks with Charlotte and Mr. Collins soon became walks with Mr. Darcy.

They spoke of many things during their time together. He would ask her questions about her life at Longbourn, about her sisters and their new families, and especially about her uncle's business in London. He seemed most interested in imported goods, and Elizabeth hoped that he would seek out Mr. Gardiner to ask the questions which she could not answer.

For his part, Mr. Darcy spoke of his estate in Derbyshire, and his pride in his younger sister and her accomplishments. Elizabeth could not escape feeling as though her own neglected accomplishments paled in comparison, but she had resolved at a very young age that she would not be ruled by such things.

What good was the ability to play the pianoforte if one could not speak to their household staff without shaking, or manage that household properly? Her brush with the possibility of being mistress of Hunsford had filled her with a new purpose, and when she returned to Longbourn, she would turn her mind to such things with vigor.

He had also spoken of the American colony again, now no longer a colony, of course, but of the opportunity available there for men with ambition. He spoke so fondly of it, that Elizabeth

began to wonder if he had met a young woman in his travels there. It would be the only explanation or his affinity for it, and his frequent visits.

However, in the final week of her time at Hunsford, Mr. Darcy was absent from the suppers they took at Rosings Park, and when she approached the gardens for her daily walk, the gentleman was not present.

She knew that he had not departed the estate, but his absence was noticeable. Lady Catherine did not mention it, nor did Anne, but Elizabeth felt it more keenly than she would ever admit.

He had spoken so often of going to America that it seemed likely he had already begun to plan for his departure. A task better suited to being in London than lingering at Rosings Park.

Anne seemed quiet and withdrawn in those weeks, and Elizabeth's worry consumed her.

At breakfast on their final day at Hunsford, she finally broke her silence on the matter.

"Mr. Collins, do you know what manner of illness plagues Miss de Bourgh?"

The parson smiled indulgently and set down his tea cup, a sure signal that a long-winded answer was about to follow her question. "Miss de Bourgh was always a sickly child. Her Ladyship tells me that when she was young, she was stricken with a similar malady. Headaches would spring up with a change in the weather, the arrival of spring heralded more issues with breathing and tightness in the chest—"

Elizabeth bit her lip and looked down at her own neglected tea. Lady Catherine de Bourgh certainly unburdened herself of all things when it suited her.

"But it seemed that when she reached a certain age that all of her maladies somehow... disappeared."

Elizabeth looked up in surprise. "Disappeared? Surely, not."

"I tell you truly, Cousin, her Ladyship is one of the healthiest

women of my acquaintance.”

The parson’s statement indicated that it was one of the highest of compliments, and Elizabeth knew very well that Mr. Collins prided himself on being immeasurably skilled in the art of complimenting ladies.

“I do hope that such a thing is true for Miss de Bourgh,” Charlotte remarked. “She did look quite pale at supper, did she not?”

“Indeed, she did, my dear,” Mr. Collins agreed. “I have no doubt that she will come through it all with no issue. Why, Lady Catherine herself bears no hint that she was ever so sickly...”

“It will prove some impediment to her marriage if her Ladyship is waiting for her daughter’s ailments to... disappear, as you say,” Elizabeth said thoughtfully. “One would hope that some concession could be made.”

“A possibility, to be sure,” Mr. Collins said, but then he lifted his teacup once more to indicate that he had finished speaking on the topic.

Elizabeth wondered if her Ladyship’s plan for her daughter’s marriage included the assurance that Anne would not succumb to her illness before the event occurred. It would be more difficult, surely, to be burdened with a bridegroom who would inherit Anne’s wealth than it would be to maintain a daughter with an unnameable illness that kept her abed.

“I must confess, I am most wretched over your departure,” Mr. Collins announced. “I had thought that this visit would end upon an engagement, and I cannot express my happiness, which has increased greatly in recent days, that such a thing has come to pass.”

He laid a hand upon Charlotte’s and her cheeks flushed slightly before she pulled her fingers out from under his. Elizabeth forced herself to smile. She was happy for her friend, but the itch of resentment had not yet departed. She had hoped that returning to Longbourn would help her start to make sense of her journey once

more, but, in truth, their imminent departure only served to make her feel more lost and alone.

Mr. Collins' worshipful smiles and comments did not help matters. She recalled Mr. Darcy's observation that she must be relieved to be freed from the parson's affections—and it was true. She *was* relieved, in a way. But she was also even more knotted up, and more despairing of her particular situation than ever.

"My father has written to say that you should come to Lucas Lodge for Christmastide," Charlotte said. "It would be wonderful to have one last Christmas at home before our wedding."

Mr. Collins grimaced slightly. "My dear Charlotte, nothing would give me more joy than to spend this most precious of holidays with your family, but I could not tear myself away from Rosings, or my parishioners, at such a time of the year. My presence will be sorely needed here, and I could not deprive them of it."

"Of course," Charlotte said softly.

Elizabeth felt a pang as she realized this would, indeed, be Charlotte's last Christmastide with her family. Mr. Collins' work, and his devotion to Rosings, and Lady Catherine, would keep him at Hunsford for much of the year. If she were to travel back to Hertfordshire for any reason, she would, no doubt, be traveling alone.

Charlotte, herself, seemed to have come to the same conclusion, and Elizabeth saw the realization dawn on her face, and then disappear just as quickly. "It is no matter," she said. "I cannot imagine how wonderful it would be to celebrate Christmastide here."

"My dear, you would be blinded by its magnificence and her Ladyship's generosity flows like water—"

Elizabeth turned her attention to her tea and the remnants of her breakfast. The sooner they could depart, the sooner she would be able to attempt to forget the sound of Mr. Collins' voice and the way his nose crinkled when he spoke of Rosings Park. It was a

painful display, and that sense of relief began to steal through her once more.

As she watched Mr. Collins and Charlotte together, she wondered what she could possibly have been thinking that she could even entertain the possibility of agreeing to be the wife of such a man. It would have been a ridiculous match. Utterly ridiculous. And she would have hated every moment of it. She would have hated *him*...

When the carriage arrived, Charlotte seemed reluctant to leave, a fact which left Elizabeth baffled as she tried to imagine what her friend might be thinking. They were no better matched in any way, save for the fact that Charlotte's convictions were stronger than Elizabeth's had been.

Sir William jumped down from the carriage and strode down the path toward the house. Mr. Collins had the good sense to look somewhat nervous and Elizabeth hid her smile as Charlotte's blustering father entered the parsonage, kissed his daughter's cheek, and ushered Mr. Collins down the corridor toward his study.

Charlotte laughed softly as Elizabeth came to stand beside her. "I do hope Father will be gentle with him," she said.

"I am certain that your father will do no such thing," Elizabeth said with a smile. "Mr. Collins is most fortunate that you are of an age where his permission is no longer required for an engagement."

"He would have given it, regardless of his own feelings," Charlotte said confidently. "Father trusts my judgement."

"Even in matters of the heart?" Elizabeth shook her head. "If my father were so inclined, Lydia would have been married to four officers already... all at once!"

Charlotte laughed and wound her arm around Elizabeth's waist. "Then I suppose my father is lucky that I am not so inclined to flights of fancy. Or officers."

“He is, indeed.”

“Oh, Lizzy, I must tell you something...”

Elizabeth pulled away from Charlotte’s embrace and lifted her valise from the carpet as a footman came to collect it for loading onto the carriage. “Oh?”

Charlotte waited until the footman had taken her valise and walked on down the path before she spoke. “It is something that Lady Catherine said over tea the other day... You were out walking.”

“Of course.”

Charlotte had taken tea with Lady Catherine on several occasions, but Elizabeth had never pressed her for details about what they spoke of. It was not that she minded being overlooked in this case, but perhaps she was only ignoring her true feelings on the matter.

“It was about Mr. Darcy.”

Charlotte knew that Elizabeth had grown fond of the gentleman’s company, and her interest in what had been said grew slightly more intense.

“What about him?”

“Lady Catherine was quite dismissive about his plans to go to America,” she said softly. “I know that he had spoken of it to you.”

“He has, quite enthusiastically. Could Lady Catherine really forbid him to go?”

“She could,” Charlotte replied. “And from what she said, it seems that she did. It led to a disagreement... one that Mr. Darcy left quite abruptly.”

“I did wonder why he was not at Rosings...” Elizabeth mused.

“Her Ladyship was quite angry about it,” Charlotte said. “She went as far as to say that he had been carrying out some correspondence with a young woman there. She was determined to save him from scandal...”

“Scandal? Really?” Mr. Darcy did not seem like the sort of gentleman who would willingly put himself in the way of a scandal

of any kind. He was far too stoic and severe to entertain such things.

Charlotte nodded. Her eyes were wide and full of concern, and Elizabeth had a sudden flash of worry that there had been other talk that Charlotte was not yet prepared to reveal to her.

“Surely, not,” Elizabeth said firmly.

“I cannot say for certain,” Charlotte admitted. “But her Ladyship is quite determined that such a thing will not happen. Mr. Darcy’s responsibilities are here in England. And at Rosings.”

“At Rosings?”

“Oh, indeed,” Charlotte said. “Her Ladyship has even considered breaking Anne’s current engagement to wed her to Mr. Darcy— A gentleman that she could trust with Anne’s inheritance. Do you not agree?”

Charlotte’s voice sounded far away and strange, but all Elizabeth could do was nod in agreement.

“Of course,” she murmured. “Very practical.”

Her original worry that Mr. Darcy had been engaged to a woman in America had been awful enough. But to hear Charlotte’s firm assertion that Lady Catherine would step in and ensure that such a thing did not occur filled her with a new sort of dread.

Sir William’s booming laughter echoed down the corridor and Charlotte leaned against the wall and breathed a small sigh of relief.

“My poor Mr. Collins would not survive one moment of my father’s ire,” she said. “So it is a very good thing that he is in a jovial mood this morning.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth laughed. She wanted to speak to Charlotte more about what else had been discussed over tea with Lady Catherine—but she also wanted to know nothing of it. Knowing nothing was preferable in this case. Of that she was certain.

Their departure from Hunsford brought Elizabeth no real relief from her swirling emotions. The carriage ride back to Hertfordshire

was filled with conversation instead of the quiet she craved. Plans for the wedding, which Lady Lucas had written of extensively, were discussed, as were potential dates for the wedding itself.

It came as no surprise to Elizabeth that Mr. Collins wanted to be married as soon as possible. Which meant only that he was eager to return to his normal duties and leave his wife to tend to matters which he had previously forgotten or given to another person to arrange. In this case, that other person was Lady Catherine, and it was she who had done much of the arranging, which seemed to be the only way anything was done around the Rosings estate.

Elizabeth did her best to contribute to the conversation, suggesting things here and there as she saw fit, but otherwise, she watched the scenery through the carriage window and wondered when there would be talk and preparations for her own wedding.

Perhaps never.

She had written ahead to Jane to tell them of their departure and when to expect their return. But when the carriage turned into Longbourn's courtyard, there was no one in the doorway to greet her.

It had been some time since Elizabeth had been away from home, and she sometimes forgot that there was really no one left at Longbourn apart from Lydia.

"Will you come in for tea?" she asked as the carriage lurched to a stop. Sir William declined gruffly and Charlotte's smile was apologetic.

"I really must see my mother," she replied.

"Of course."

Lady Lucas would be overjoyed to see Charlotte and congratulate her on her proposal, and from the expression in Charlotte's eyes, Elizabeth could see that it had been quite some time since her friend had been given her mother's approval for anything... A pity, really, that it would take something like an engagement to change a mother's opinion of her daughter.

She climbed down from the carriage with the assistance of a footman and carried her valise to the door. As the carriage rolled away, Elizabeth waved in farewell and then took a deep breath before pushing the door open and stepping into Longbourn's familiar foyer.

The house was quiet and she breathed a small sigh of relief to be enveloped by it once more. She had become quite comfortable in the small rooms and corridors of the parsonage, but there would never be anything quite the same as stepping into the house she had lived her entire life in.

Longbourn. It was in her blood, and she did not know if she could ever leave it.

But she would have to. Eventually. Her failure to secure Mr. Collins as a bridegroom had dashed all of those hopes. It was Charlotte who would be mistress of this house, and Elizabeth would have to find a way to give her mother that news in such a way that would not cause any strife.

Although, knowing Lady Lucas and her appetite for gossip, there was a chance that her mother already knew what had transpired at Hunsford, and Elizabeth would have to brace herself for that revelation as well.

Elizabeth was seated in the parlor with a book in her lap when she heard shoes crunching over the gravel of the courtyard and the front door of the house opened.

"Mama, you cannot restrict me on my ribbon choices," Lydia cried. Elizabeth smiled and closed her book. Even at twenty, Lydia's arguments were still those of a young girl. Next they would be arguing over bonnets and gloves like she and Kitty used to do—but that seemed so long ago now.

"I can and I shall," Mrs. Bennet snapped. "You do not hem your own dresses, and when you do it is a waste of fine ribbon! Until you are able to show that you will not be so careless with your stitches, I shall not buy you the ribbon you desire so much!"

"But, Mama!"

"Enough! I will hear no more! Next you will be asking me for a new parasol..."

"I had not thought of such a thing," Lydia said tartly. "Perhaps I do need one."

"It will be winter in a few short weeks, you foolish girl. Your pestering is making my head ache. I shall have to ring for some tea and smelling salts if you persist!"

Her mother's voice was loud in the corridor and Elizabeth took a deep breath as her mother swept into the room. "Lizzy! Oh, my dear, we are so pleased to have you home!"

Elizabeth was enveloped in her mother's tight embrace and a cloud of perfumed powder. Such a reception could only mean that she did not know about Charlotte and Mr. Collins. Perhaps that news could wait.

When she had finally extricated herself from her mother's arms, Lydia's embrace followed, and Elizabeth struggled to escape from the outpouring of affection, laughing as she did so.

"Was I missed so very much?" she said breathlessly as her mother eased herself down into her favorite chair.

"Indeed you were," Mrs. Bennet huffed. "Lydia, ring for some tea, I am famished from that walk!"

"Papa was miserable," Lydia said as she walked across the room to ring the bell for tea.

"Miserable," Mrs. Bennet echoed. "But no more of that. You have returned just in time to hear the most wonderful news!"

"It is not wonderful news," Lydia said. "It is tedious news that has no interest for me. However, the regiment has returned to Meryton, which means that we shall have an assembly soon, but Mama will not let me have the ribbon I want. It matches my eyes

perfectly, Lizzy. But if *you* would agree to hem my gown for me, then perhaps Mama would allow it!”

“Lydia...” Mrs. Bennet’s tone held an edge of warning and Elizabeth pressed her hand to her lips to smother her laughter.

“I will, of course,” Elizabeth said. “It would be a tragedy, indeed, to deprive you of such a marvelous ribbon.”

“I told you that Lizzy would understand,” Lydia said smugly. She flounced back to the couch and fell upon the cushions with a gusty sigh.

“Now, may I say what has happened?” Mrs. Bennet asked archly.

Lydia rolled her eyes. “If you must.”

She had been away from Longbourn for enough time that Elizabeth could find such an exchange charming, but if she had overheard it at any other time she would have done so with more than a little irritation.

Mrs. Bennet laid her fan upon the table at her elbow and leaned forward. “I cannot tell you how excited this news has made me, Lizzy. But Meryton is abuzz with it!”

“Come now, Mama, I cannot bear the suspense,” Elizabeth said with a laugh.

“Netherfield Park is let at *last*!”

“Netherfield Park?” Elizabeth could not have guessed that this would be the news that had so captured her mother’s attention. “But— it has been vacant for so long.”

“It has, indeed,” Mrs. Bennet said brightly. “But now it shall be inhabited by a fine gentleman from London. A wealthy gentleman.”

“And his family, surely,” Elizabeth said.

“Perhaps, but there is more.”

Lydia groaned. “She has discovered that he has five thousand a year and is unmarried.”

“Five thousand!” Mrs. Bennet cried gleefully. “It has been ever so long since a rich gentleman has come within ten miles of

Hertfordshire. I shall have to tell Jane at once. Should I write a letter so that she might know of it before she returns this evening?"

"No, Mama," Lydia sighed. "You must tell her yourself, though I do not know what she might care for such a thing."

"She might care a great deal," Mrs. Bennet huffed. "It is not too late for Jane to find a husband."

Lydia snorted and Elizabeth glared at her before looking back to her mother. "And when is the gentleman set to arrive?"

"Before the end of the month, I should think," Mrs. Bennet replied. "I cannot recall the precise date, but I was assured that he would be invited to the assembly. He and all of his party!"

"That is, indeed, wonderful news," Elizabeth said.

"Only if Mr. Bennet will agree to go and see him when he comes," Mrs. Bennet sighed. "He has been staunchly against any of my requests in recent weeks, but now that you are back in Longbourn his mood should improve dramatically."

"Oh? What has happened?"

"Nothing at all," Lydia said in a bored tone. "Papa takes his supper in the study and will not listen to any of Mama's demands, which has made her furious on several occasions."

"Lydia! I have heard enough from you today," Mrs. Bennet cried. "Where is Mrs. Hill with our tea?"

Elizabeth rose from her chair and kissed her mother's cheek. "I shall go and find out what is keeping her," she said.

While she had been in Hunsford, Elizabeth had missed the company of her family, but now that she had returned, it was overwhelming. And she had not yet decided how she was to tell her mother the news of Mr. Collins' engagement to Charlotte. At the moment, she was preoccupied with the news of Netherfield Park's newest tenant, but that interest would not last long, and her mother's eye would soon turn to her for an explanation as to why she had returned from Hunsford without the promise of a marriage that would save Longbourn...

As Elizabeth walked down the corridor toward the kitchen, she paused in front of her father's study door. It was closed, but Elizabeth knocked gently.

"Yes?"

Relieved that he was home, Elizabeth opened the door and stepped inside. In the parlor, Lydia and Mrs. Bennet's argument had increased in volume and she was happy to escape it.

"Papa, I did not know if you would be home," Elizabeth said. "I would have come to see you sooner."

"No matter," he said with a smile. "It is wonderful to have you home."

Elizabeth smiled warmly and seated herself in one of the well-worn leather chairs in front of her father's desk. "Lydia mentioned that you were not pleased with my absence."

She was teasing him, and her father's eyes twinkled as he harrumphed and closed his ledger. "Indeed, it was most irritating." He sat back in his chair and tapped his fingers against the glass of brandy on his desk thoughtfully. "And your time at Hunsford... was it as you had hoped?"

Elizabeth sighed heavily. "It was not."

Mr. Bennet's eyebrow rose slightly and Elizabeth stood up from her chair, pulled the empty brandy glass out of her father's hand and took it with her to the sideboard. She unstopped the glass decanter and refilled her father's glass, and then poured a small

measure into another glass for herself.

“Was it so terrible as all that?” Mr. Bennet asked carefully as Elizabeth placed the glass upon the desk and returned to her chair.

“It was not terrible,” Elizabeth replied. “But the realization of what my life would have been like if I had accepted Mr. Collins’ proposal—”

“Did he propose?”

Elizabeth took a sip of brandy, grimaced, and then shook her head. “No, Papa. Not to me.”

“I see.”

Elizabeth took another sip, this time the taste of the brandy was not as terrible. “Charlotte Lucas will be the mistress of Longbourn someday.”

Mr. Bennet sipped his own brandy and chuckled. “Mrs. Bennet will not appreciate that news.”

“I know,” Elizabeth said mournfully. “How shall I tell her?”

“You have two approaches before you,” he said. “You may tell her honestly and firmly, and then give her time to be angry with you for something beyond your own control and cannot be changed.”

“Or?”

Mr. Bennet chuckled again. “Or, you may wait for Lady Lucas to send letters to all of her friends announcing the long-awaited engagement of her eldest daughter.”

Elizabeth made a face and then laughed. “I do not like either of those options.”

Her father smiled. “I did not say they would be enjoyable.”

“No... certainly not.”

“What happened, my dear?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Nothing, Papa. Mr. Collins simply enjoyed Miss Lucas’ company. And I am certain that Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s opinion factored heavily into his decision.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.”

“I... I feel as though I should apologize,” Elizabeth said

haltingly. “I have let the family down. I thought that I would be able to do this—”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Mr. Bennet said firmly. “It is I who should apologize for putting you in this situation in the first place. The entailment— it seemed the best way to solve a problem that was beyond my own control.”

“I know, Papa,” Elizabeth said. “We are all unhappy casualties in this...”

“No, indeed,” Mr. Bennet said. “I could only have been unhappy to see my dear Lizzy married to that sycophantic toad of a man and pretend that she did not mind it.”

“Oh, Papa, it really was terrible,” Elizabeth admitted with a laugh. “Suppers at Rosings Park, tea at Rosings Park, the endless discussions about the history of Rosings Park and the windows...”

“Not the windows again,” Mr. Bennet sighed.

“I do not know why I thought— Well, it does not matter now,” Elizabeth said with a sigh.

“Was there truly nothing enjoyable about your stay at Hunsford?” Mr. Bennet asked.

Elizabeth sipped her drink and looked down into the glass. “There was one bright spot,” she said. “I became acquainted with a gentleman... Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

“And who is Mr. Darcy?” her father asked.

“He is nephew to Lady Catherine... He has interest in travel and business abroad in America, but her Ladyship seems to think that he will be engaged to her daughter.”

“How very interesting,” Mr. Bennet said. Elizabeth knew that her father was not interested in the slightest, but that did not matter. She had not admitted to herself just how enjoyable her interactions with Mr. Darcy had truly been. His presence had been the only thing that had kept her from falling into despair over her failings.

But it was not truly a failing... Not really. Though her mother would not take it as such.

“A wealthy gentleman, traveling abroad,” Mr. Bennet said. “I should like to see the American colony someday, though the travel and expense is somewhat prohibitive...”

“It is not a colony any longer, Papa,” Elizabeth said. “You know that very well.”

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Bennet said absently. “Will you see this Mr. Darcy again?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I should think not, Papa,” she replied. “But that is no matter. Perhaps I shall turn my attentions to seeing Lydia properly married.”

Mr. Bennet took a sip of his brandy and shook his head. “I wish you all the luck in the world with that particular endeavor,” he said.

Elizabeth set her unfinished brandy upon the desk and pressed her palm to her cheek. “Mama will wonder where I have disappeared to,” she said. “I had only left the parlor to see what was keeping Mrs. Hill and the tea...”

“Do you know what you will say to her about Mr. Collins?” Mr. Bennet asked as he opened his ledger once more.

“No, indeed, Papa,” Elizabeth admitted.

“Then you had best finish your brandy and decide quickly, your dear Mama has been in a strange mood these past weeks during your absence. I daresay she has already begun planning your wedding—”

“Oh, dear,” Elizabeth murmured. She plucked the glass from the table, drained its contents and rose from her chair. “Thank you, Papa. I cannot say whether I feel better or worse about the whole situation...”

“Better, I should think,” Mr. Bennet said firmly. “You are still very much yourself, Lizzy, and I was afraid that you might have lost some of that in your hurry to do your duty.”

“Oh, Papa.” Elizabeth came around the desk and kissed the top of her father’s head. “I promise I will not do such a thing again.”

“Excellent,” Mr. Bennet said. “See that you do not.”

Elizabeth laughed and set her empty glass upon the sideboard where a tray of dirty dishes, leftover from his breakfast, no doubt, had been laid. She lifted the tray and took her leave of her father's study.

She felt better after speaking to him, but still did not know how her mother would react to the news. Lydia and Mrs. Bennet's argument echoed in the corridor and Elizabeth sighed heavily before turning toward the kitchens.

The clatter of dishes and Mrs. Hill's tuneless humming filled her ears as she stepped into the warmth of the kitchens. She had not realized how cold the corridors were until that moment and she smiled gratefully at the housekeeper as she laid another strip of pastry over the top of a pie.

"Mrs. Hill, I have brought some dishes from Papa's study..."

"Oh, that man! Perhaps he will eat supper like a civilized gentleman now that you are returned home," Mrs. Hill huffed as she wiped her hands on her apron and took the tray from Elizabeth's hands.

Elizabeth looked around the kitchen, but did not see anything prepared for tea. "Did you hear the bell?" she asked.

"Bell? Is someone at the door?"

"No, for tea. Lydia rang for tea," Elizabeth said with a smile.

Mrs. Hill's eyes widened in horror. "I did not hear it! Oh!" She rushed about the kitchen in an effort to make up for the time lost and Elizabeth stepped in to assist her. Between the two of them, water was put on to boil, the teapot prepared, cups, saucers, milk, and sugar were placed upon a tray and the housekeeper was in the midst of locating some pastries to set alongside the tea when the kettle over the kitchen fire began to boil.

"Perhaps you might need some more help in the kitchens," Elizabeth offered gently. Mrs. Hill had always been very proud of her ability to keep pace with everything that happened in the house, but as the years advanced, the housekeeper began to struggle more and more. Elizabeth was not the only one who had

noticed, but Mrs. Hill had always stubbornly refused to accept the help that was offered, and the maid who had been hired to assist was only permitted to do the most menial of tasks.

The housekeeper sighed heavily as she poured the hot water into the teapot. "I shall consider it," she said.

"Good," Elizabeth said. "It is not a judgement, it is merely to give you some assistance when you need it."

The housekeeper nodded and Elizabeth picked up the tray. "I shall tell Mama that you were delayed with another task."

Mrs. Hill's smile was grateful, if a little strained. "Thank you, Miss Lizzy."

Elizabeth balanced the tray and walked down the corridor with steady steps to keep the teapot from spilling over. The last thing she needed was to be splashed with boiling water.

As she walked, she tried to think of how she would tell her mother about Charlotte Lucas' engagement.

"We shall have to ask Lizzy for her opinion!" Lydia cried as Elizabeth turned the corner. She briefly entertained the thought that she could drop the tray in the foyer and run out into the courtyard and not stop running until she reached Meryton—but that would never do.

She took a deep breath and walked down the corridor and into the parlor. Lydia's cheeks were red and her eyes blazed angrily.

"Whatever is the matter?" Elizabeth exclaimed. "I was gone for only a few moments!"

"Mama seems to think that I should entertain the attentions of a doctor... A doctor, Lizzy! Could you imagine me as a doctor's wife? I know how these marriages turn out. The poor woman will be his nurse, or his helper... you know that I cannot bear the sight of blood, or the lamenting of sick people. What help would I be to such a man?"

Elizabeth glanced at her mother, but Mrs. Bennet glared angrily at her youngest daughter and fluttered her fan with sharp motions. "You should be of no help, at all," Mrs. Bennet snapped. "But

perhaps you could *learn* to be useful to your husband!"

"I shall do nothing of the sort!" Lydia cried. "Lizzy, tell her that I would be ever so unhappy as a doctor's wife!"

Elizabeth set down the tea tray and tried to keep from laughing. Lydia would, indeed, be a poor wife for a doctor.

The only doctor in Meryton had married a woman of similar ambitions to himself, and she had taken on the role of nursemaid, amateur apothecary, and tended to patients every bit as confidently as her husband. But Mrs. Crescent was a remarkable woman, and Lydia was... Lydia.

"Has there been some interest from a doctor?" Elizabeth asked.

Lydia stomped her foot. "She has sent my portrait to a woman in London who has a son who is a country doctor somewhere in Wales! A Welshman! Lizzy!"

Elizabeth could not conceal her laughter any longer and Lydia's furious face only made it all the more difficult to avoid.

"You are the most difficult and ungrateful daughter," Mrs. Bennet huffed. She leaned forward to pour herself a cup of tea. "Why can you not be more like your elder sisters?"

"Which one?" Lydia asked tartly. "Shall I be like Jane who refuses to do anything but play nursemaid to Kitty's children? Or like Lizzy who has only just returned from a failed attempt to beg for a husband?"

Mrs. Bennet almost dropped her teacup. She looked at Elizabeth with wide eyes. "Failed?"

Elizabeth glanced at Lydia and noted her sister's smug expression. But how— *How had she known?*

"Is it true, Lizzy?" Mrs. Bennet asked softly. "Did you return to Longbourn without an engagement to Mr. Collins?"

Elizabeth looked down at her hand and then met her mother's gaze. "I have. Mr. Collins has chosen someone else for his bride."

"Who?"

Mrs. Bennet's question was sharp and Elizabeth winced slightly. "Charlotte Lucas."

“Charlotte Lucas?” Her mother’s voice was shrill and loud, full of surprised outrage. Lydia giggled behind her hand, and then laughed aloud. “How did this happen?”

“I— I do not know,” Elizabeth admitted. “Mr. Collins was very polite, but I do not think that her Ladyship was supportive of his affection for me.”

“What did you do?” Mrs. Bennet cried. “Perhaps you did not try hard enough!”

“I was myself,” Elizabeth said firmly. “I cannot be anything else.”

“There! That is the problem!” Mrs. Bennet wailed. “All lost. Longbourn is lost to us now. And Charlotte Lucas will be mistress of this house when your father is gone!”

Lydia stepped forward and snatched a pastry off the tray. She bit into it with relish, obviously happy to not be the focus of their mother’s ire any longer.

“What will you do now, Lizzy?” she asked slyly. “Perhaps Mama will send *your* portrait to the Welsh doctor instead.”

“Oh, Lydia, *do* be quiet!” Mrs. Bennet wailed. “My nerves... I cannot take this.” She rose from her chair with a choked sob and held her handkerchief to her nose before rushing out of room. Elizabeth sighed and poured herself a cup of tea. Her mother’s footsteps echoed on the stairs and Elizabeth wondered how long she would wait to offer her begrudging forgiveness for the wrongs that had been done to her.

Lydia laughed around her mouthful of pastry and Elizabeth glared at her. “How did you know?”

“You seemed entirely too happy,” Lydia said simply. “If you really had returned with an engagement to that beast, I would have expected you to be as morose and despondent as Miss Kingsley. But unlike her, you would be planning a wedding!”

Miss Kingsley, another of Lydia’s friends, seemed to have a habit of pining over young men who had no interest in her while ignoring the ones who did. She spent all of her time at balls and

assemblies trying to catch the eye of the most exciting young officers and when they did not ask her to dance, she spent the remainder of the evening drinking rum punch and wiping away tears.

“You are very cruel to your friends, Lydia,” Elizabeth observed.

“Only when they deserve it.” Lydia took another pastry and then leaned against the arm of the couch. “What will you do now that you will not be a clergyman’s wife?”

Elizabeth frowned and poured a small amount of milk into her mother’s abandoned tea. “I have not decided,” she said honestly. “I had thought I would put my efforts into finding you a husband, but it seems as though you will not be happy with any of Mama’s suggestions.”

Lydia made a face. “Indeed, I shall not be.”

“Then what will *you* do? You will not marry a doctor, or a clergyman, or a lawyer... what is left?”

“A man who makes me laugh,” Lydia said brightly. “And one with money enough to keep me in pretty gowns and will take me dancing every fortnight... and he will let me win at cards.”

Elizabeth laughed and shook her head. “An impossible task,” she said.

“Perhaps that is the way I like it,” Lydia said with a toss of her head. She popped the pastry into her mouth and wiped her fingers on her dress. “Will you hem my gown for the assembly?” she asked around her mouthful. “Mama will let me have the ribbons I want if you do it.”

“I suppose,” Elizabeth sighed. “But you must tell Mama that I have agreed to do so. I will not be responsible for her ire if she discovers that you have purchased those ribbons without her knowledge.”

“She is already angry with you,” Lydia laughed, pleased to have gotten her way. “Surely it would not matter.”

“If you want the ribbons, you will have to ask her yourself.”

Lydia let out a groan and stomped out of the room. It seemed

that she would never stop behaving the same way she had when she was sixteen. Elizabeth spooned some sugar into her tea and stirred it thoughtfully.

What *would* she do now?

Helping Lydia find a husband seemed out of the question, Mary's family had not yet begun to grow, and Kitty already had Jane's assistance. What was left for *her*?

October ~ 1816

It had taken weeks for Mrs. Bennet to forgive Elizabeth, but, as was usual, the forgiveness was conditional upon Elizabeth never speaking of Charlotte Lucas in her presence.

Jane had been sympathetic, but distracted, when Elizabeth told her of what had happened. The approaching assembly and the news of the new resident of Netherfield Park had taken over as the predominant topic of conversation in the house, and while Jane pretended to be interested it was obvious that her thoughts were bent toward other things.

She would not say what, but Elizabeth had her suspicions.

New officers had come to Meryton to join the regiment, and Lydia was aflutter with describing each and every one of them with minute detail. She would rise early and walk into Meryton with Jane on the pretence of visiting Kitty, but Elizabeth knew that it was to make acquaintance with the new garrison officers, instead. Kitty did not mind, but Jane had tired of Lydia's antics and seemed to have a difficult time keeping her opinions to herself.

"She is not interested in any of them, or perhaps it is all of them at once, I can never be certain," Jane observed one evening as they sat in the parlor. Elizabeth was focused on the finishing touches to the alterations she was making to one of her older gowns, and was keeping a careful eye on her stitches as the ribbon she had chosen was proving particularly difficult.

“None of them,” Elizabeth replied softly. “She cares only for fun and frivolity. I fear that Mama might be driven mad with all of her failed attempts to find our dear sister a husband.”

Jane smiled briefly. “And what of you?” she asked. “I had expected that you would turn your eye toward the garrison once more.”

Elizabeth laughed. “No, indeed. I believe I am done with such things... at least for now.”

“A pity,” Jane said. “To hear Lydia describe it, the new officers are handsome enough to make the light of the sun dim in their company.”

“And every one of them with a gambling habit to make King Midas poor in a fortnight.”

Jane laughed and turned a page in her book. “And the assembly — Why did you agree to go? I know that you have not had any interest in them for some time now.”

“I felt that I needed some merriment in my life,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “I have not felt much like dancing of late, but I am weary of seriousness and should like to laugh a little.”

“Charlotte Lucas will no doubt be there.”

“Of course she will be, and her mother will speak to anyone who comes near about her daughter’s engagement. I am sorry that Mama will be distressed by it, but Charlotte is still my friend, and I am happy for her.”

“Poor Mama,” Jane sighed. “I fear she will not truly forget this slight until you have married the Duke of Winchester and moved the whole family to London.”

Elizabeth burst out laughing and pricked her finger with the needle accidentally as she did so. “Oh, indeed, perhaps then she could find it in her heart to forget how I have wronged her.”

“What are you laughing at?” Lydia asked as she came into the parlor. She wore her newly hemmed dress and she twirled in front of them to show off the new additions that Elizabeth had made to the bodice and the change in the sleeves. “Do you like my gown,

Jane? Lizzy did wonderful work with this ribbon.”

“It suits you very well,” Jane said dutifully. Elizabeth regarded her work with a more critical eye, but it did, indeed, look well on her.

“Will Kitty come to the assembly?” she asked.

“She has not yet decided,” Jane said. “Though I hope she will.”

“And will you look after her children while she dances?” Lydia twirled again and smiled at the way the skirts of the gown flared out as she turned.

Jane’s lips pressed together into a thin line. “No. Mr. Andrews’ mother has come to visit, she will be very capable indeed.”

“How fortunate,” Lydia said. “Mama will not stop talking about how this new gentleman will be looking for a bride. I have told her that it is impossible, but she seems determined that you should dance with him.”

“So I have heard,” Jane said dryly. “Has she seen this gentleman yet? What if he is old and ugly?”

“Oh, no,” Lydia said. “Miss Kingsley’s father went to meet him, he is very young. And handsome too, or so she says. If I had any interest in marrying a gentleman... Perhaps I should ask him to dance with me.”

“Has Papa been to see him?” Jane asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Not that I know of. But Mama will not cease in demanding that he do so. Which means that he has not done it on purpose just to vex her. Or, he may have done so and is keeping it a secret for the same reason.”

“Oh, Papa,” Jane murmured.

“Will you come to the assembly then?” Lydia asked.

“I suppose I shall,” Jane replied. “But I may not stay for very long.”

“Nor I,” Elizabeth said as she set her final stitch and frowned at her work. The ribbon roses she had fastened to the bodice looked well enough, but she was not happy with the ones that she had sewn to the sleeves. Perhaps no one would notice. But she would

know.

She bit her lip in frustration and snipped at the threads with a small pair of scissors.

“How many times have you sewn that same spray of roses to your sleeve?” Jane asked.

“Four times,” Elizabeth said evenly. “But this will be the last.”

“It looked very well before you started snipping,” Jane observed.

Elizabeth shook her head and ignored her sister’s teasing smile. “And what will you wear to the assembly,” she asked to change the subject.

Jane sighed. “I have an ivory gown that I have not worn since the last regimental ball. It will do very well without any hemming.”

“Mama will have something to say about it,” Elizabeth said softly.

“I do not mind,” Jane replied. “I have no time for hemming or new ribbons. If a gentleman remarks upon the age of the velvet ribbon on the neckline I might have cause for some embarrassment...”

Elizabeth laughed. These were not the details that concerned any gentleman she had ever met. As the years had passed, Jane had become less concerned about such things. She maintained that ribbons and alterations were only important to the wearer of the dress, and the women who might comment upon it. Elizabeth could not fault her logic, but it was difficult to break her own habit of re-hemming her own gowns with new ribbon at every opportunity.

“I shall ask Papa if he has visited Netherfield Park,” Lydia announced. “Mama will want to know.”

“As you like,” Jane said.

Lydia dashed out of the room and Elizabeth shook her head and re-threaded her needle. “Do you really believe that this gentleman would be an old man?”

“I have more difficulty believing that a young man of good fortune would take up residence in a country estate,” she said. “Young men with money enjoy the opportunity to spend it, and to show their friends just how much money they have... You cannot do such a thing in a country estate. There is no one to impress in Hertfordshire.”

“Perhaps he is not that sort of gentleman,” Elizabeth said. “Perhaps he is the sort of gentleman who values a quieter pace of life than London has to offer.”

“Perhaps,” Jane murmured.

“**W**hy must you always be so tardy?” Mrs. Bennet shouted up the stairs.

Jane, Elizabeth, and Mrs. Bennet stood in the foyer, dressed against the cold and waiting, as usual, for Lydia.

“I cannot find my gloves!”

Lydia’s angry shout echoed down the stairs and Mrs. Bennet groaned loudly.

“Jane, do go and help her,” Mrs. Bennet snapped. “We shall already arrive late, and I cannot bear the thought that we shall be the last to arrive. Even Kitty will be there by now!”

“Of course, Mama,” Jane said.

She rushed up the stairs and Mrs. Bennet opened the door and marched out into the courtyard where the carriage waited. “Come along, Lizzy!”

Elizabeth did not particularly want to spend any time alone with her mother. It was enough to be in the same room with her for much of the day—and while there was very little that Mrs. Bennet would not hesitate to speak of in front of the family, Elizabeth was very sure that there were a few topics that her

mother would prefer to discuss with her in private. Namely Mr. Collins and the problem of the engagement that had been expected.

Elizabeth had done her best to avoid any kind of conversation on that topic, and with the excitement of the assembly Mrs. Bennet had seemed to forget that she was cross. That did not mean, however, that she would not remember as soon as she and Elizabeth were alone.

Better not to take the risk.

“Lydia you are impossible,” Jane exclaimed. “These gloves are beyond repair, why did you not say anything sooner?”

“I did not think it would matter!”

Elizabeth sighed heavily and tugged at her own gloves.

“You will miss the first dance,” she called up the stairs.

Lydia let out a desperate wail. “No! I cannot miss— Jane may I *please* borrow a pair of your gloves?”

There was more muffled conversation and then Jane’s footsteps echoed above as she stomped to their bedchamber. Lydia thundered down the stairs with her cloak thrown over her arm. Her hair had already come unpinned in three places and Elizabeth grabbed her younger sister by the shoulder and forced her to stand still as she re-pinned Lydia’s wild curls.

“Ow!” Lydia cried. “Must you stab them through my scalp?”

“Stop it,” Elizabeth muttered. “There is no other way to make them stay.”

Jane came down the stairs with a pair of gloves clutched in her fist. “If you stain these, I shall be very cross with you.”

“I promise I will not,” Lydia said. She held out her hand for the gloves and Jane handed them over reluctantly.

“That is precisely what you said before you ruined the last pair I lent you,” she said darkly. “See that you do not do it again. No red wine!”

“Fine,” Lydia muttered. She flinched again as Elizabeth slid another pin into her hair.

Elizabeth pushed her sister toward the open door. "There. Now, cloak on and get to the carriage. Mama will be in hysterics if we do not leave soon."

Lydia made a face at them and then ran through the doorway toward the carriage.

"Hurry, girls!" Mrs. Bennet cried. "The assembly will be over by the time we arrive!"

Elizabeth and Jane exchanged an exasperated look and then walked together toward the carriage. It was already proving to be a long evening, and Elizabeth had a feeling that everything that would follow would be a test of her patience.

They were disastrously late.

By the time the carriage pulled around to the courtyard of the Meryton Assembly Rooms, the festivities had already been underway for almost an hour. Elizabeth could see couples dancing and the music was loud and bright as it echoed through the darkness.

Lanterns had been hung in the trees, and adorned poles that had been erected outside the building to light the way for late arriving guests.

"I have never been so late to arrive to an assembly in all my life," Mrs. Bennet complained as she stepped down from the carriage. Lydia pushed past them all and ran up the stairs.

"Lydia!" Jane called after her, but there was no use in trying to keep Lydia from a dance floor. She would already be furious that the first dance had passed her by, and she would have precious little time to fill her dance card with desirable partners.

"She will complain that all the handsomest partners have been snapped up by other ladies," Elizabeth said with a smile.

Jane laughed. "If it is like any other assembly, there will be more ladies than gentlemen in any case, so there will be even more competition to contend with for whomever has been left unpartnered."

"A terrible tragedy, indeed."

"Come along," Mrs. Bennet snapped. "No doubt Lady Lucas has already told everyone at the assembly about her daughter's engagement. No doubt I shall have to contend with questions I detest answering all evening and smile graciously at all of her many witticisms."

Lady Lucas was one of her mother's dearest friends, but there was no shortage of competition between the two. If Lady Lucas served a duck at an event, Mrs. Bennet would endeavor to do the same... Even one of Mariah's suitors was a young man whom Lydia had spurned only a few months past.

Hertfordshire was small enough, but competitions like this made it feel a good measure smaller, especially to Elizabeth.

The assembly rooms were loud and filled with finely dressed guests. It was a semi-annual event, and Elizabeth saw many familiar faces in the crowd, including Charlotte Lucas.

Her friend waved brightly and made her way through the crowd toward them. Mrs. Bennet veered away toward her own friends who were clustered near the dance floor so that they could best observe and comment upon the dancers and their choice of partners. Among them all, Mrs. Bennet had the most married daughters, and had been seen as something of a role model when it came to her matchmaking skills. It was something that Elizabeth had found laughable when her mother had boasted of it, and she was grateful in a small way that her lack of an engagement did not contribute to her mother's prowess in that arena.

"Charlotte," Jane exclaimed. "How wonderful to see you. I must congratulate you on your engagement."

Charlotte blushed prettily and accepted Jane's warm embrace. "I thank you," she said as she pulled away. "But I truly have Lizzy

to thank for my happiness.”

“Indeed?” Jane glanced at her sister quickly. “However could that be?”

“Why, without Lizzy, I never would have stepped foot in Hunsford, and I would not have become acquainted with Mr. Collins. I have been very fortunate.”

Elizabeth swallowed thickly. She had not expected that Charlotte would give her credit for the introduction. Charlotte had been meant to accompany her... not sweep an engagement out from under her nose. However, if it had been so easily swept away, there was nothing for her to mourn, or be angry over.

“It is a great joy to me to see you settled,” Elizabeth said. She embraced Charlotte tightly. “How are the plans for the wedding coming along?”

Charlotte sighed heavily. “Mr. Collins insists that the wedding will be held in Hunsford. At Lady Catherine’s own private chapel.”

“How wonderful,” Elizabeth said.

“Yes, wonderful,” Charlotte echoed. “Her Ladyship has also suggested that the wedding should take place in the first week of February.”

“February?” Jane blurted out. “But—”

“It is very sudden, I know,” Charlotte said. “But her Ladyship will be traveling in April, and the dates I had originally hoped for would not suit...”

“I see.”

Elizabeth could see her friend’s distress, and she wondered how much of the preparations for the wedding would be overseen by her Ladyship. She already knew that Mr. Collins would take any advice Lady Catherine offered—for it was not truly advice. It was always a command instead of a suggestion.

“You look lovely this evening,” Charlotte said brightly, clearly hoping for anything to take the conversation away from her engagement. Elizabeth did not have to wonder if she regretted her decision, the answer was written plainly upon her face. However,

the promise of security must have been more alluring than anything she would have to endure under Lady Catherine's watchful eye.

"I have determined that I shall buy no more ribbons until my wedding day," Jane declared. "This dress will remain hemmed in antique velvet until such a day arrives."

Elizabeth and Charlotte could not help but laugh at her determination, but Jane's laughter stopped suddenly and her eye was drawn to the double doors that led into the ballroom.

"I do not recognize that young man," she said. "Surely, he is not one of the officers."

Charlotte looked over her shoulder to where Jane stared and then shook her head. "No, indeed. That is Mr. Charles Bingley. He has just signed the lease on Netherfield Park. Father visited him only three days past."

"Do you think our father has gone to Netherfield Park?" Elizabeth said softly.

"I could not say," Jane replied.

"Well, father says that he is a very pleasant sort of man. Not at all like the young men he usually meets in London."

"I cannot tell if that is praise or not," Jane laughed.

Charlotte smiled. "It is high praise, indeed. He said that Mr. Bingley was quick to smile, and laughed at all of his jokes."

"A good quality, to be sure," Elizabeth said. "Mama says that he has five thousand a year."

"Another very good quality in a gentleman," Charlotte laughed.

"And who is with him?" Jane asked. Elizabeth finally forced herself to look in the direction of the double doors. Two women and another gentleman stood with Mr. Bingley. The women were finely dressed in London fashions and bright feathers bobbed above their elaborate hairstyles.

"His sisters," Charlotte said. "Miss Caroline Bingley is the taller of the two, and Mrs. Hurst is married to the gentleman to Mr. Bingley's right. Father tells me that they are very accomplished—

Mrs. Hurst sings like a lark, and Miss Bingley plays the pianoforte with great skill. My mother hopes that they will come to her next salon, though I do doubt that they will accept the invitation.”

Mr. Hurst seemed fixated on acquiring a drink, and Elizabeth watched him head in the direction of the punch table with a singular focus.

“And on his left?” Jane asked.

Another gentleman turned and spoke to Mr. Bingley and Elizabeth’s throat tightened as she saw a face she had not ever expected to see again. And certainly had never expected to see in Hertfordshire.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.

“J
ane, he is coming this way.”

Charlotte's voice cut through Elizabeth's shock and she looked at her sister in surprise. A small smile pulled at the corner of Jane's mouth and her eyes were on the fair-haired gentleman in the doorway. He was waylaid in his progress as some gentleman or other stepped in his path to bow and offer their greeting, but though Mr. Bingley paused to speak to each of them, his eyes always strayed back to Jane.

Mr. Darcy, for his part, had not yet seen Elizabeth, he was in conversation with Mr. Bingley's sister.

“What should I say?” Jane's whisper was almost desperate and Elizabeth grabbed her hand and squeezed her fingers gently before releasing it as the gentleman approached.

“Mr. Bingley,” Charlotte said brightly. “You are most welcome, sir. Please allow me to introduce my dear friends.” She pushed Jane forward slightly. “This is my dear friend Jane Bennet, and her sister Elizabeth Bennet.”

He bowed to them all and straightened slowly, meeting each of their gazes individually. Mr. Bingley's smile was infectious, and Elizabeth could not help but like him instantly. Jane seemed entranced, and she had to be prodded to make her curtsy.

“Bennet?” Mr. Bingley said. “I have had the pleasure of meeting your father when he called at Netherfield Park soon after our arrival. I am so pleased to finally meet you,” Mr. Bingley said.

Jane's cheeks flushed slightly.

"We did not know if our father had visited Netherfield Park," she said.

"He did, indeed," Mr. Bingley said. "Though he did not tell me that his daughters were so charming." He turned to Elizabeth. "And Miss Elizabeth Bennet, I have heard your name spoken before."

"You have?" Elizabeth could not hide the surprise in her voice.

"Indeed." He turned to look over his shoulder to where his sisters stood. "My friend, Mr. Darcy, he has spoken your name on several occasions. He will be pleased to know that you are here."

"Will he?" Elizabeth said. "When last I saw him, I did not have a chance to bid him goodbye, he departed Rosings Park so abruptly."

"Ah, yes," he said with some chagrin. "I will apologize on his behalf. His departure was my doing. I required his assistance with all haste to secure Netherfield Park. I do hope that you will be able to renew your acquaintance while we are here."

"As do I."

"Miss Bennet—" Mr. Bingley's attention turned back to Jane. "May I request the pleasure of the next dance?"

"I— Of course," Jane replied.

The music of the dance swelled behind them, signalling the end of the dance in progress, and Mr. Bingley offered Jane his elbow. She laid her hand upon it and followed him to the dance floor.

"Charlotte... why—"

"Father went to visit Mr. Bingley as soon as he had taken residence," Charlotte said in a hushed tone. "But he did so before he knew that I had already accepted Mr. Collins' proposal. I believe he had intended for Mr. Bingley to be introduced to me... but as I am already to be married— Jane seemed the most logical choice for an introduction. How fortunate that they seem to be well matched... do you not agree?"

Elizabeth looked over Charlotte's shoulder to where Jane and

Mr. Bingley had taken up their positions for the next dance. Her sister seemed happier than Elizabeth had seen her in months, and Mr. Bingley's smile was broad and charming.

"I do, indeed," she murmured.

"Will you come and meet Mr. Bingley's sisters?" Charlotte asked.

Elizabeth nodded. "I believe I will need a glass of punch first."

"I certainly agree," Charlotte laughed.

"I do not know how I shall bear this countryside..." Caroline Bingley sighed. Her sister nodded understandingly while Elizabeth gripped her empty glass of punch tighter.

Mr. Bingley's sisters were unlike any young woman Elizabeth had ever encountered, and she had not yet decided whether or not that was a blessing or a curse.

Miss Caroline Bingley, the younger of the two, was beautiful enough that she should have been married long ago. However, the moment she opened her mouth, Elizabeth's curiosity as to the reason she was unmarried fled immediately. Every word she said was condescending, spiteful, or unnecessarily mocking.

Louisa Hurst was no better. She was not as thorny as her younger sister, but her obvious disdain for her husband and their surroundings did not endear her to Elizabeth, either.

Perhaps it was the situation in which they found themselves—so far from London and the society they were accustomed to—but Elizabeth's first impression of them was not a favorable one.

Charlotte chatted with them amiably, but neither one of the sisters seemed particularly interested in anything but gossip. They disguised their curiosity under seemingly artless questions, but Elizabeth could feel their underlying scrutiny and mockery.

“Miss Eliza Bennet,” Caroline said suddenly. “Do remind me again how you are acquainted with Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth smiled briefly. She had told this story already, but whether or not Caroline had been listening remained in doubt. “At Rosings Park,” she replied. “I was there with Charlotte to visit my cousin, Mr. Collins.”

“To whom Miss Lucas is now engaged.” Caroline’s dark gaze pierced hers and Elizabeth’s chin lifted slightly. It was difficult not to feel as though every word from the tall young woman was an attack of some kind, and she felt the need to be ready to defend herself, and others, from the onslaught.

“Indeed,” she replied. “Mr. Darcy was visiting his aunt and we became acquainted during our stay at the parsonage.”

“You did not stay at Rosings Park?”

“No, the parsonage was quite adequate.”

“And how did Miss Lucas know Mr. Collins,” Caroline asked. “I am simply confused as to how such things come about, you see.”

“Charlotte accompanied me to Hunsford,” Elizabeth said. “I was there—” She paused briefly, and then decided that she could not trust Caroline Bingley with the truth behind their visit. “—I had been invited. It was a nice change of scenery. I have not seen that part of the country in the early autumn.”

“How lovely,” Caroline said, though it was clear that she did not mean it. “Did you know, Miss Eliza, that Mr. Darcy is planning a tour of the American colony?”

Elizabeth could see that Caroline’s comment was not meant for her, it was meant to draw the attention of the very gentleman being discussed.

Mr. Darcy stood just to their left. Close enough to be within earshot, but only barely. He was listening, and watching them when he thought they were not paying attention.

He had greeted her cordially enough when they walked over to join the group, and Elizabeth was pleased to be re-introduced to him, but he had said no more than three words of greeting before

she was pulled into the conversation in which she now languished.

“Yes,” Elizabeth replied. “He did tell me of his interest in traveling abroad.”

“There is a young woman, I have heard, that has captured his interest,” Caroline continued. “She is from a very good family, wealthy landowners—a plantation, they call it. Fields of tobacco. Very lucrative. Her fortunes would put even Mr. Darcy to shame.” She laughed lightly and Elizabeth noticed the gentleman’s shoulders tighten beneath his well-tailored jacket. “It would explain some of his interest in her, I would imagine. Perhaps a good deal of it!”

Caroline laughed lightly, but Elizabeth was unsure of how she should respond. The other woman’s words were filled with a smug satisfaction and Elizabeth decided that she did not like the tone of the conversation.

“How wonderful,” she said. “Is he to be engaged to the young woman? I have heard from Lady Catherine de Bourgh that he is to be engaged to her own daughter, Anne. I understand that their union has been planned for many years.”

Caroline snorted and took a long drink of her punch. “Anne de Bourgh. Poor sickly thing. If they were to be married, it would be in name only. I would be shocked if some illness or other did not carry her off before summer. Rosings Park is dreadfully cold even in the middle of summer, and her Ladyship is not generous with her firewood.”

Elizabeth tried in vain to suppress her shock at Caroline’s candid observation, but managed to bring herself under control before she noticed.

“That seems a cruel observation,” Elizabeth said tightly.

Caroline laughed and shook her head. “Oh, no, indeed. I am very fond of Miss de Bourgh. She is a lovely girl, but overshadowed by her mother’s influence. It is not cruel to say that she is sickly, or that her house is draughty, and her mother too controlling. It is the truth, but most people are too polite to notice such things.”

“And you are not?”

“Alas,” Caroline sighed. “I am not blessed with such manners, though I have tried very hard to cultivate them.”

Elizabeth found that very hard to believe, and she knew that her smile looked as forced as it felt. What observations might Caroline Bingley be making about her... No, she did not want to know anything of the sort. It was enough that she could not decide what to believe, or why the possibility that Mr. Darcy might go abroad to America to marry a tobacco heiress should cause such a pang in her chest.

“Mr. Darcy, will you dance?” Caroline called out.

The gentleman turned, but his gaze slid to Elizabeth before he inclined his head to Caroline. “You know that I do not enjoy such frivolities.”

“I am very well aware,” she said. “But we have come to a country dance, and I say that you shall dance.” Caroline glanced at Elizabeth and then back to him. “I say that you shall dance with Miss Eliza Bennet!”

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat. *What if he refused?*

What if he accepted...

"You cannot refuse me, Mr. Darcy, you are our guest at Netherfield Park, and as such I may command you as I see fit," Caroline said brightly. "I see that there will be no arguments from Miss Bennet, so you are beholden, sir."

Mr. Darcy bowed slightly and offered his elbow. "As I have no choice in the matter—"

Elizabeth bristled but laid her hand upon the gentleman's arm.

As they turned away from the group, Elizabeth found that she could hold back her ire no longer. "Do not force yourself to dance with me," she said as they walked toward the dance floor.

"I have rescued you from Miss Bingley's conversation," he said softly. "If you do not wish to dance with me, I shall take you elsewhere and you may leave my company to do as you please."

Elizabeth smiled, surprised by his answer. "Is she always so horrid?"

"Unceasingly."

Elizabeth wanted to laugh, but it seemed inappropriate. "I should like to dance," she said. "If you are willing."

"I would be delighted, though I will warn you, it has been quite some time since I have been called upon to perform in such a manner."

"I will guide you," she said as they approached the dancers.

Mrs. Bennet stood near the musicians with Kitty, and Elizabeth tried to avoid her mother's eyes as the dance ended and she and Mr. Darcy stepped onto the floor together.

She would have to avoid questions about the gentleman when the assembly had ended, but at that moment she did not particularly care.

She curtsied deeply as the first notes of the dance began and smiled as the gentleman fell into place. He seemed comfortable enough with the steps and Elizabeth was somewhat grateful that he did not need her assistance.

"I did not think to see you in Hertfordshire," Elizabeth said as the dance began.

"I did not think that Mr. Bingley would have chosen an estate so close to London and so far from my own home," he said. "When he asked me to accompany him, he did not reveal the location of his new house... so it was all a mystery to me until our arrival."

"And how do you find Hertfordshire? Is it very different to Derbyshire?"

He smiled briefly, and shook his head. "Not so different. Perhaps with less hills and more houses, but it is charming enough."

"A generous compliment, indeed," she teased him. He had spoken often of Derbyshire in their conversations at Rosings Park, and she felt as though she knew it from those descriptions. Lakes and rivers, forests of oak and beech... and rolling hills as far as the eye could see.

Hertfordshire boasted many of the same attributes, but its proximity to London meant that it was, indeed, more densely populated than other areas of the country.

"I hear from Miss Bingley that you will be traveling abroad soon," she continued when it was clear that he had nothing more to say. The steps of the dance took them away from one another and Elizabeth caught sight of Jane laughing with Mr. Bingley across the floor and her heart lifted to see her sister so happy.

"That is my plan," he replied as they came together once more.

"And how long do you plan to be away?"

"As long as may be required."

A simple answer, but one that held several questions within it. What was the nature of his journey, and what of the young woman that Caroline had mentioned—the tobacco heiress...

"Miss Bingley also mentioned a young woman," she blurted out. "Am I to understand that there may be congratulations in order?"

"For what?" His reply was sharp and Elizabeth was surprised by it.

"An engagement, of course," Elizabeth stammered.

"Did Miss Bingley say that there was to be an engagement?"

"I— Not precisely."

"But you have inferred it from her comments?"

Elizabeth was taken aback by the anger in his voice and she could only nod in reply.

"I see."

The steps of the dance took them to other partners for several beats, but Elizabeth could feel the gentleman's gaze burning into the back of her neck as they parted.

When they came together again, she felt compelled to apologize, but Mr. Darcy would not allow her to finish her sentence.

"There is nothing to apologize for, Miss Bennet, you have done nothing wrong. Miss Bingley is mistaken. There is no engagement. Only a journey abroad."

"I— I should not have assumed."

"One might be forgiven for such things," he said. "It is commonly understood that a gentleman without a wife is either in search of one, or is beyond hope and undeserving of one. There is no middle ground on which a man might stand between the two."

"And what ground might that be?"

The gentleman shook his head and laughed softly, but before he could reply, the dance had ended, and Elizabeth was pulled away

from the dance floor by Kitty before she could say anything else.

She looked in vain for him, but Mr. Darcy seemed to have disappeared into the crowd.

“Lizzy! Who was that?” Kitty hissed into her ear. “Mama will not stop talking about Jane and Mr. Bingley. How wonderful! Did you see, they have danced the last four dances together and are waiting for the next! Mama is beside herself with joy.”

“Yes, wonderful,” Elizabeth murmured.

November ~ 1816

The Meryton Assembly was only the beginning of something wonderful for Jane. Her acquaintance with Mr. Bingley had been remarked upon by almost everyone who had attended the dances, and there were more than a few rumors that there would be an announcement of an engagement before the new year turned.

Mrs. Bennet was, of course, overcome with happiness that her prediction should have come true so quickly. To have Jane be the immediate object of this new gentleman's affections was unexpected, but expected, at the same time. Mrs. Bennet made no secret of her adoration for him, and spoke of him often over supper, and at any occasion that called for it.

Jane remained quiet about her affection for the gentleman, but it was clear enough to anyone who saw them together that the seeds of love were being sewn with every interaction.

Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Hurst solidified these rumors by inviting Jane to Netherfield Park for tea on an almost daily basis through the month of October. Mrs. Bennet tried her best to intervene and cause some reason for Jane to stay at Netherfield Park for an extended amount of time to force the gentleman into some affinity for her, but the relationship did not seem to need any such trickery to develop.

Elizabeth accompanied her sister to Netherfield Park on several occasions, but there was only so much time that she could spend in

Caroline Bingley's company before becoming angry. Her initial impression of Caroline, and, indeed, her elder sister, seemed to be entirely correct.

Mr. Bingley was out of place amongst the three of them. Where they were bitter and disingenuous. Mr. Bingley was kind and gracious, quick to smile, and always ready with a compliment.

Mr. Darcy, however, was more difficult. He was often absent from Netherfield Park, though Elizabeth saw him several times in passing. Each time he would bow and favor her with a few words of greeting, but they did not speak any more than that, and Elizabeth began to fear that she had offended him with her bold assumptions at the assembly.

It was not until the arrival of an invitation to the annual regimental ball that Elizabeth finally found the opportunity to speak to Mr. Darcy again.

Since her acquaintance with Mr. Bingley, Jane had shown a new interest in ribbons and lace, and though Elizabeth teased her gently for her sudden change of heart, she was secretly pleased that her sister had changed her mind about such things.

As the night of the ball approached, Elizabeth and Jane were in Meryton to purchase new gloves, and a package containing several lengths of velvet and satin ribbon was clutched under Elizabeth's arm as they dodged puddles in the cobbled streets.

"Do you think that Mr. Bingley will notice the new ribbons," Jane asked breathlessly.

"I do not think that Mr. Bingley will notice anything but the way you look at him," Elizabeth laughed. "Gentleman do not care for ribbons, you have said so yourself!"

"I know," Jane sighed. "It was a silly thing to wonder."

"Not at all. We should all like to think that we are dressing for every eye in the room, not just ourselves."

"I think I shall put pearls in my hair this time," Jane continued. "I have not done so for several years..."

"This is true. I do think he will like the pearls, if that was your next question."

Jane's cheeks flushed and she laughed. Elizabeth squeezed her sister's fingers. It was good to see her so happy, and she felt sure that their mother was correct in hoping that there would be a proposal soon. Perhaps even by Christmastide.

"Lizzy, is that Mr. Darcy?"

Elizabeth looked up to see a gentleman on horseback coming down the road that led into Meryton. He was alone, and his expression was one of determination.

"It is, indeed," she said.

Above them, dark clouds gathered, threatening rain, and Elizabeth knew that they should return to Longbourn before the downpour began. November had been uncharacteristically wet, and the fields and roads were muddy and full of water.

As the gentleman approached, Elizabeth lifted her hand in greeting. Mr. Darcy pulled back on the reins to slow his mount and touched his fingers to the brim of his hat. The shoulders of his coat were wet with rain, and the horse was soaked and shining.

"Miss Bennet," he said. "A lovely autumn afternoon, is it not?"

Elizabeth laughed and frowned up at the clouds above them. "A very typical day, indeed," she replied.

"Will you come to the regimental ball," Jane asked. She was really asking if Mr. Bingley would be attending, but if Mr. Darcy would be there, then surely his friend would be as well.

"There has been talk of such a thing," he replied. "Though I do not know if I shall be able to attend. Business calls me back to London, and I cannot ignore the affairs of my estate for too long."

"You shall be greatly missed," Jane said with a smile. She nudged Elizabeth forward. "You must excuse me," she said. "I should speak to Mrs. Carrow about something Mrs. Hill asked me to order while we were in town."

Jane squeezed Elizabeth's arm lightly and then turned away, leaving Elizabeth and the gentleman alone in the street.

“Mr. Darcy, I— You must allow me to apologize for what was said at the assembly. Miss Bingley was mistaken, I believe, and I should not have taken her at her word.”

“There is no apology necessary,” he said. She had expected him to smile, but his expression did not change.

“And do your plans to travel abroad continue?”

“They do.”

The horse shifted its balance and Elizabeth stepped back to avoid it. “I do hope that you will be able to attend the regimental ball,” she said. “It is always a wonderful party whether or not you choose to dance. Colonel Forster’s card tables are generous, and the food is of the very best quality...”

“I do not play cards,” he said.

“Do you not?”

“I have no talent for cheating, or gambling,” he admitted and Elizabeth breathed a small sigh of relief to see him smile.

“I fear the officers would give you a good deal of competition in that arena,” Elizabeth said.

She glanced up at the sky as a drop of rain struck her cheek. “Oh, dear... I shall have to fetch Jane. We are not equipped to be outdoors in a downpour!”

“I must ride on to Netherfield,” Mr. Darcy said. “I shall consider your invitation most carefully.”

“See that you do,” she called out. The gentleman nudged his mount forward and Elizabeth rushed across the street to where Jane stood with Mrs. Carrow at the butcher’s shop.

She tugged on her sister’s arm. “We must go, it is about to rain!”

Jane bid the butcher’s wife goodbye and pressed a paper-wrapped package into Elizabeth’s arms.

They walked quickly through Meryton’s streets, but as they turned onto the dirt road that would lead them back to Longbourn, a creak peal of thunder rippled through the sky and the rain began to fall.

Jane and Elizabeth shrieked and ran down the road, knowing full well that they would be soaked to the bone when they arrived at Longbourn. The rain was cold, and the wind was sharp, but Elizabeth's interaction with Mr. Darcy was warm in her chest and she did not feel the cold quite so keenly.

A strange thing, she thought, that such a short interaction could mean so much.

She had apologized for the misunderstanding... it was a small thing. Very small, indeed, but his silence had plagued her. Perhaps now she might discover the truth about his purpose for traveling to America, and whether or not he would be married to Anne de Bourgh. She still did not know why it mattered so much...

He was an acquaintance... Perhaps even a friend; if such a thing were even possible.

The regimental ball was an annual event that everyone in the Bennet household had always looked forward to with great anticipation. Kitty, herself, had a special affinity for the event, as it was where she had first danced with the officer who would become her dear husband.

Whether Lydia had the same hopes for her own future was unclear, but Mrs. Bennet seemed determined that something should happen for the remainder of her unmarried daughters before Christmastide.

Jane and Mr. Bingley's affection for one another seemed to grow with each passing day, and it seemed most likely to end in a proposal before the end of the year.

Elizabeth had, thankfully, escaped her mother's attentions, but she knew that it was only a matter of time before her mother forgot her bitterness and turned her attention back to finding a

suitable husband for Elizabeth.

Colonel Forster's wife was the same age as Lydia, and they had developed a friendship which Elizabeth had never truly approved of. If Lydia was ever found in the midst of a situation that was only a few moments away from becoming a scandal, it was certain that Mrs. Forster was somehow connected.

She would always vehemently deny her involvement in such things, but Elizabeth did not trust her.

When the family arrived at the Regimental Hall, the dancing was just about to begin. The musicians were already playing the opening bars of one of Lydia's favorite tunes, and her squeal of joy was loud enough to be heard over the music. Elizabeth flinched, and Jane gripped her hand tightly before she spied Mr. Bingley and his sisters standing to the side of the dance floor.

"Do not worry about me," Elizabeth whispered. "Go and claim your dances with your handsome partner."

Jane did not need any more encouragement, and she made her way through the crowd with quick strides. The smile on Mr. Bingley's face as she approached was enough for Elizabeth to know that an engagement could not be far away. She was surprised that it had taken so long already.

"But where is Mr. Darcy?" Mrs. Bennet's fan fluttered nervously.

"Whatever do you mean, Mama?" Elizabeth asked.

"He danced with you twice at the Meryton Assembly," her mother exclaimed. "I had hoped that he would renew his interest—that is unless, of course, you have said something to displease the gentleman?"

"Indeed, I have not," Elizabeth said firmly. "I do not know if he will be coming tonight."

"But if Mr. Bingley is here, he cannot be far behind!" Mrs. Bennet rose up on her toes to see the crowd better. "There are so many news officers, I cannot tell which ones I have met and which ones have just arrived."

Her mother's concerns were difficult for Elizabeth to bear, and her smile was thin as she accepted a glass of punch from a passing footman.

"Are you certain that you would not accept the affections of an officer?" Mrs. Bennet asked absently.

"No, Mama," Elizabeth replied firmly. "I would not."

"Hopeless," Mrs. Bennet sighed. "So many young men in need of a good wife. And look how handsome they are in their regimental coats."

"Mama, I see Charlotte," Elizabeth lied. Anything to get her away from her mother's incessant scheming.

"Yes, yes. Do, please explain to her how she should manage Longbourn when your father is gone. I suspect that she will want me out of the house as quickly as possible so that she might move in with all of her large furniture and a gaggle of children that look just like Mr. Collins..."

"Mama, do not be so dramatic," Elizabeth said, but she could not prevent the smile that crossed her face at the image that sprang into her mind of Charlotte standing in Longbourn's courtyard with children crowded around her skirts as she shouted at furniture movers who strained under the weight of her Lady Lucas' antique wardrobe.

She knew that Charlotte would be in no hurry to become mistress of Longbourn. If anything, she would be waiting to inherit Lucas Lodge—it was a larger house in a much finer location... and she did not believe that there would be any reason to turn her family out into the street. Mrs. Bennet would believe what she liked, but the truth would be much less horrifying, especially with Charlotte at the helm of any changes or decisions that might be made in regards to the future of the estate.

Mrs. Bennet waved Elizabeth away with a flick of her fan, and Elizabeth took the opportunity to escape into the crowd. She had, of course, not seen Charlotte, but it was as good an excuse as any, which was all she needed.

“Lizzy! Lizzy, look over there.” Kitty reached out and gripped Elizabeth’s arm tightly. “The dance floor, look!”

Elizabeth smiled thinly and turned obediently to look in the direction her sister had indicated. “What am I looking at?” she asked.

“Lydia! Lydia and that officer! He is newly arrived in Meryton. Oscar has told me that he comes from Derbyshire...”

“Derbyshire,” Elizabeth murmured. Just like another gentleman of her acquaintance. “What else do you know of him?”

“Only what I overheard as Mrs. Forster introduced him to Lydia... He is new to the regiment, and purchased his commission from a bequest granted to him by his father... He is childless, without a wife, and in possession of the finest smile I have seen since I met my own husband.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said. “Then I shall have to make better acquaintance with this gentleman, to see if he is worthy of our Lydia.”

“Mrs. Forster seems to think so,” Kitty said.

Elizabeth watched her youngest sister and the tall officer as they turned on the dance floor. His smile was as fine as Kitty had said, and his eyes sparkled in the candlelight. All of his attention was focused on Lydia, who was making the most of it. Her laughter was bright and loud, and her movements were sure-footed and flirtatious as the steps changed and brought them together once more.

“I do not trust Mrs. Forster’s choice in gentlemen,” Elizabeth said softly. Kitty’s eyes widened briefly, but she nodded her agreement.

“I cannot argue with you,” she said. “But I have only met this gentleman once, and he only had eyes for Lydia.”

“Of course he did,” Elizabeth said. “She is young and exciting, and a far more talented dancer than any of the other young ladies here tonight.”

“I would not agree with that,” a man’s voice said.

Elizabeth turned just as Kitty's husband, Mr. Oscar Andrews, appeared at her shoulder and spun her around to face him. She laughed brightly and accepted her husband's kiss upon her cheek.

"Dearest, what do you know about the officer who is dancing with Lydia?" she asked him.

Mr. Andrews, dashing and handsome in his regimental jacket, frowned as he looked at the dancers. He brightened as he spotted Lydia and her partner.

"George. George Wickham," he said. "I do not know him well. Only that he is newly arrived, and that he has already earned a name for himself at the card tables... word travels fast among the men when their money is on the line."

"A gambler, then," Elizabeth muttered.

"A fortunate one," Mr. Andrews laughed.

"I do not think that Mrs. Forster would put Lydia in any danger," Kitty said reassuringly.

"Nor do I," Elizabeth sighed. She did not have time to be suspicious. It was enough to see Lydia having fun. Though, she was never sad when there were partners to be had and music for dancing.

"Oh, Lizzy, there is Mr. Darcy," Kitty exclaimed. Mr. Andrews pulled his wife toward the dancers as the music picked up to signal the end of the dance already in progress.

Elizabeth waved her sister away and turned to see the gentleman as he strode through the crowd. She was pleasantly surprised to see him there, but he was not looking at her—instead, he stared intently into the crowd of dancers.

"Mr. Darcy," she said as he came near. "I did not think to see you here!"

"Miss Bennet," he said with some surprise. "I— I do apologize, I thought I saw someone that I knew..."

"It is no matter. I will not keep you from your destination... if there is somewhere—"

He smiled and shook his head. "No, no, indeed. I would much

rather speak with you.” He glanced over her shoulder at the dancers and then saw his expression harden. “I believe I have found the person I was looking for,” he said darkly. “Your sister, Lydia, I believe... She is in danger.”

“Danger?” Elizabeth whispered. She looked over her shoulder to where her sister curtsied to Mr. Wickham, her partner for the third time that evening. “Whyever would you say such a thing?”

“The gentleman she is partnered with has no business being here,” he snarled.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “I do not know him,” she said. “I have heard that he has only just arrived in Meryton. The Colonel’s wife introduced them at the beginning of the evening...”

Mr. Darcy’s eyes narrowed. “George Wickham has no place in this regiment,” he said darkly. “And I would keep him as far away from your sister as possible.”

Elizabeth was confused, and the gentleman did not seem inclined to reveal his reasons easily. “What has he done?”

“A private matter,” he replied. “But one that concerns your sister, and your family if he is not brought to heel immediately.”

“I do not understand—”

“There is nothing to understand,” he said gently, as though he had realized how harsh he sounded. “I shall have to speak to him quietly. Will you call your sister over when the dance has ended.”

“Lydia is difficult to remove from a dance,” Elizabeth said with a wry smile. “But I shall try.”

They stood together for a moment, watching the dancers as they moved over the floor and swayed, curtsied, and bowed in time to the music.

As Lydia whirled by, Elizabeth caught her eye and beckoned her over. Lydia frowned, but then nodded as she realized the seriousness of her sister’s expression. If she had been younger, she would have stuck out her tongue and stayed on the floor for at least three more dances.

But with her new partner, Elizabeth knew that she would be

eager to show him off.

Mr. Wickham smiled in Elizabeth's direction, but she saw his eyes narrow as he sighted the gentleman at her side.

"Do you know Mr. Wickham?" she asked.

"Very well, indeed," Mr. Darcy replied. "Far too well."

"May I know the circumstance?"

Mr. Darcy glanced at her briefly before staring back out at the dancers once more. "He was the son of my father's valet. When the elder Mr. Wickham died, my father took young George in and raised him as a member of our family. We were like brothers, he and I. Which is what made his betrayal all the more hurtful."

"Betrayal... Oh, dear." Elizabeth did not know what else she might say, but she could not imagine the pain of such a thing.

The dance ended and Elizabeth watched as Lydia attempted to leave the dance floor with Mr. Wickham in tow. The officer seemed unwilling to make the journey, and they argued briefly, but Lydia did not release her grip on his wrist, and eventually she was able to leave the dance floor, dragging a very reluctant Mr. George Wickham with her.

"Lizzy! You shall have to remind me to thank Mrs. Forster for gifting me with the most handsome, most charming, and most excellent dancer for a partner this evening," she exclaimed. Lydia's cheeks were pink, and her eyes were bright with her exertions, but Mr. Wickham looked very poorly, indeed.

His gaze flickered to Mr. Darcy and then back to Elizabeth.

Lydia pointed at Elizabeth and smiled widely. "George, this is my sister, Lizzy."

Elizabeth had to bite her lip to keep from admonishing her sister for her casual introductions, but this was neither the time, nor the place for such things.

"Miss Bennet," Mr. Wickham said as he bowed. "I am honored to meet you. Mrs. Forster did tell me that there were several Bennet sisters, but I did not realize that each one would be handsomer than the last."

“You shall have to scold her for her dereliction of duty,” Lydia laughed. “I would have told you that I am the prettiest. And the best dancer. Lizzy is passably good at drawing, but her pianoforte playing is terrible.”

“Lydia, enough,” Elizabeth said shortly.

“What did you want?” Lydia asked. “I have introduced my new partner, and we have exchanged pleasantries... I should like to get back before we miss another dance, do you not agree, George?”

“Mr. Wickham. I should like a word with you.”

Mr. Darcy’s voice was sharp and cutting and Elizabeth looked at him in surprise, but he said nothing more.

Mr. Wickham’s jaw tightened as he processed those words. “Whatever for?” he asked with a smile that was every bit as charming as the last.

“Outside,” Mr. Darcy said coldly.

“What is this all about?” Lydia asked. Her voice had taken on a strange edge, and Elizabeth could feel the tension between the two men as it stretched tighter and tighter with every moment that passed.

“Outside,” Mr. Wickham repeated. He glanced at Lydia and extricated himself from her grasp. “If you will excuse me Miss Lydia, I must have a word with my oldest friend.”

“Why can you not speak here?” Lydia asked. “You may speak in front of us, why should they not speak in front of us, Lizzy?”

“Perhaps it is best if we allow the gentlemen to speak in private,” Elizabeth said swiftly. “Come now.” She pulled on Lydia’s arm and they watched as the two gentlemen stalked from the hall and disappeared from view.

“**B**ut, Lizzy... we must go after them!” Lydia cried.

Heads turned in their direction and Elizabeth’s smile was tight and strained as tried to bring her younger sister under some kind of control.

“Hush, Lydia. People are staring...”

“I do not care, what is happening? What does Mr. Darcy want with Mr. Wickham?”

Elizabeth grabbed for her sister’s hand and held it tightly. “Clearly they have some disagreement that Mr. Darcy does not want to confront before a crowd. We must give them their privacy.”

“I should think not,” Lydia said vehemently. She pulled her hand from Elizabeth’s grasp and stomped through the hall toward the doors.

“Lydia!”

But her sister was not listening.

Without thinking, Elizabeth rushed after her. She did not usually indulge Lydia in her attention-seeking tantrums, but this was different. She had no place coming between the two gentlemen—whatever they needed to discuss, they had wanted it to be away from the other guests. Lydia had no right—

“Stop it!”

Elizabeth froze in the doorway as Lydia’s shout echoed in the courtyard.

At the edge of the lantern lit space, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham stood with fists clenched and eyes narrowed.

Lydia hovered nearby, her hands clasped in front of her and her voice held a note of desperation.

Elizabeth dashed across the courtyard and pulled Lydia away from the men. Mr. Wickham's expression was one of grim determination as he faced off against Mr. Darcy.

"I do not want to fight you, William, but if I must, I will!"

Mr. Darcy did not seem bothered by his friend's boldness, or that he was the taller of the two. "You are not welcome here, George. I shall be having words with Colonel Forster about your removal from the regiment."

Mr. Wickham laughed, and the sound made a shiver run up Elizabeth's spine.

"Will you now?"

"I cannot allow you to continue on this path, your appetite for ruin is insatiable, and I will not—"

"What is he saying, Lizzy?" Lydia cried. "I do not understand!"

Elizabeth could make no sense of it either. But whatever was amiss, it was clear that neither man would be moved.

She did not see who threw the first punch, but she did see Mr. Darcy's fist connect with Mr. Wickham's face. The taller man reeled back, and Elizabeth could see hatred in his eyes as he lunged for Mr. Darcy.

Lydia screamed and pulled away from Elizabeth's grasp. Elizabeth tried to catch hold of her again, but she could not grab her in time to keep her out of the fray. Lydia ran forward, shouting for them to stop, but the two men ignored her.

Elizabeth could hear murmured conversation behind her, and she knew that whatever attempt had been made to keep this disagreement private had been all for naught as guests from the ball came out into the courtyard to see what was happening.

"I say, is that Darcy?" Mr. Bingley's voice was bewildered as he came up to Elizabeth.

“It is,” she said breathlessly. “And Mr. Wickham.”

Mr. Bingley’s expression changed in an instant. “Wickham that —” He glanced at her quickly and then muttered a quick apology before he strode quickly across the courtyard toward the fighting men.

Elizabeth was at a loss. Lydia hovered just to the edge of the fight, and she could not allow her sister to be in harm’s way. Her worry for Mr. Darcy was increased as Mr. Bingley tried to step in, but was pushed back as he avoided a blow meant for Mr. Wickham.

Each man had landed at least one devastating hit on the other. Mr. Wickham’s lip was split and bloody and his chest heaved with effort as he staggered back. Mr. Darcy had a cut on one cheek, but was otherwise unscathed, and his eyes were full of anger as he glared at the other man.

“Leave Meryton now, and I shall not be forced to see you removed... Go. And do not come back.”

Mr. Wickham spat a mouthful of blood upon the ground and reached for something at his hip.

“Mr. Wickham! No!” Lydia leapt forward and reached for the officer’s elbow, but she was knocked back by the motion of his arm as he drew a knife from his belt. She stumbled back and Elizabeth cried out in alarm as Lydia fell heavily in the mud.

“Stop this at once!”

Colonel Forster, resplendent in his regimental garb strode across the courtyard surrounded by a group of officers. He stepped between the two men and glared at each of them in turn.

“Wickham, your behavior is unbecoming of this regiment. You will return to barracks immediately.”

Mr. Wickham slid the knife back into his belt and Elizabeth wondered if anyone else had seen him draw it aside from Mr. Darcy and herself.

She ran toward Lydia and helped her to stand. Lydia clung to her waist and turned her face into Elizabeth’s shoulder. She was

shaking, and Elizabeth knew that it was not from the cold.

The officer raised his hands and tried to smile, but his teeth were stained with blood and he winced in pain. "Sir, I—"

"I will not hear it," the Colonel snapped. "You will be reprimanded in the morning." He gestured to two of the other officers who had accompanied him. "Take him back to barracks and see that he does not leave the garrison."

Mr. Wickham glared at Mr. Darcy as he was led away into the darkness, but he said nothing more.

"Mr. Darcy, I do hope that you will accept my humble apologies for this misunderstanding," the Colonel said. "My men are exemplary officers, and I take full responsibility. I hope that you will come to the garrison to take coffee with me in the morning so that we may discuss this further."

"Indeed, it would be my pleasure," Mr. Darcy said. He straightened his jacket and accepted a handkerchief from Mr. Bingley to press against the cut on his cheekbone.

It was only then that the gentleman realized that Elizabeth was there, and his hard expression softened in an instant. Colonel Forster and his men returned to the hall, but Elizabeth's desire to dance had disappeared.

"Miss Bennet... are you hurt," Mr. Darcy asked gently.

Lydia shook her head. "No, sir. Only startled. I had not— I—"

"We should return to Longbourn," Elizabeth said gently. "Mr. Bingley, if you would tell Jane that Lydia and I have left? Tell her not to worry."

Mr. Bingley smiled kindly. "Of course. Shall I escort you to the carriages?"

Elizabeth nodded dumbly as Mr. Bingley offered his arm to Lydia, who leaned upon it gratefully. She was oddly silent as she walked, but Elizabeth suspected that it would not last long.

Mr. Darcy offered Elizabeth his elbow, which she accepted gratefully.

"Are you hurt?" she asked softly.

“No... Mr. Wickham has never been particularly skilled at... I am sorry that you had to witness such a thing. I am not usually given to such—”

“What happened between you?” Elizabeth asked.

The gentleman’s expression was strained. “This is not the proper time to explain,” he said. “But I promise that I shall, in due course.”

Elizabeth was not satisfied with his answer, but he offered no other explanation.

The crowd that had gathered to watch the fight trickled back into the hall where the dancing had continued despite the Colonel’s sudden departure. They seemed disappointed that there were no more dramatics to be observed, but Elizabeth remembered the flash of the knife in the dark, and she was glad that the Colonel had stepped between them.

Ahead of them, Mr. Bingley helped Lydia into a carriage and then held the door open for her.

“Good night, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy said stiffly. Mr. Bingley glanced at his friend in confusion, but then smiled reassuringly at Elizabeth.

“Good night, gentlemen.”

The carriage door closed and the driver’s whip snapped over the backs of the horses. Lydia was huddled against the seat and would not look up, but Elizabeth watched the lights of the hall as they shrank into the darkness, and Mr. Darcy’s silhouette as he watched the carriage roll away.

L Lydia stayed abed for three days following the incident. She

was bruised and shaken, but otherwise unharmed. Her dress, however, was beyond repair; stained with mud and torn in three places that could not be mended without leaving obvious signs that it had been damaged. With each day that passed, Elizabeth's half-expected hope that the gentleman would call on Longbourn to better explain himself waned, for even after three days, there was no sign of Mr. Darcy.

Jane and Mrs. Bennet had returned from the ball full of concern for Lydia, and a strange curiosity over the new officer who had caused such a commotion in his first week at the regiment.

"What do we know about Mr. Wickham?" Jane asked one morning as she and Elizabeth took their early morning breakfast together while the rest of the house slept.

"Not a great deal," Elizabeth confessed. "He was raised on Mr. Darcy's estate... he said that they were like brothers. But then he betrayed the family in some way—he would not explain how or why."

"Well, it is very clear that whatever it was, Mr. Darcy has not seen fit to forgive him."

"Or, Mr. Wickham has not asked for forgiveness..." Elizabeth countered.

"This is very possible," Jane mused. "Mr. Bingley seemed to know, or seemed unwilling to say more, than you have already

told me. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham are well acquainted, it seems... but there is no more than that.”

“I am certain that there is much more,” Elizabeth said with a sigh. “But I fear that we shall never know it.”

“There has been some gossip in Meryton,” Jane said suddenly. “Kitty told me that her husband has heard some talk in the regiment that Mr. Darcy spoke with Colonel Forster.”

“Did he?”

Jane nodded and came closer, as though she were sharing a great secret. “Kitty told me that Mr. Darcy demanded that Mr. Wickham be removed from the regiment! To be removed from Meryton entirely!”

Elizabeth pressed her hand to her lips to keep from gasping aloud. “He had threatened as much at the regimental ball,” she said.

“Well, he has made good on his word,” Jane said. “Whatever it was that was between them, it seemed to have been enough for the Colonel.”

“Has he been removed from the regiment?”

“I shall find out today,” Jane promised. “But as Mr. Andrews tells it, there were a great many secrets that Mr. Wickham had kept from his commanding officer, and they are not being taken lightly.”

“Oh, dear. Poor Lydia. She did seem to like him.”

Elizabeth was not truly upset about such a development. Lydia’s affections were lightly given, but she seemed more inclined to bestow them upon the most unworthy of gentlemen... And Mrs. Forster’s endorsement of Mr. Wickham seemed all the more untrustworthy now.

“Mrs. Forster is exceedingly unhappy about the whole situation,” Jane continued as though she had heard Elizabeth’s thoughts. “Mr. Andrews tells me that he heard the Colonel and Mrs. Forster arguing about Mr. Wickham’s dismissal— he suspects that she had some fondness for the gentleman...”

“Perhaps too much fondness,” Elizabeth suggested.

Jane nodded. “That was my feeling, too.”

Colonel Forster was nearly two and twenty years senior to Mrs. Forster, and Elizabeth did not doubt that the younger woman’s silliness had not given him some grief over the time of their marriage.

“Whatever happened, I feel that Lydia has been saved from some scandal,” Elizabeth said. “So, at the heart of it, I am grateful to Mr. Darcy for standing his ground in seeing Mr. Wickham removed.”

“I must say, I feel the same. Mr. Bingley was quite upset about the whole situation... He said that he had never seen Mr. Darcy so angry as he had been on that night.”

“I do not doubt it,” Elizabeth said. “He does not seem like the sort to be brawling at dances...”

“No, indeed,” Jane said. They sat in silence for a few moments, before Jane brightened. “Will you come to Netherfield for tea tomorrow?”

Elizabeth sighed heavily. She had been caring for Lydia for the last few days, and some time away from Longbourn, even a few hours, would be a pleasant change. “I shall, I thank you.”

“Caroline Bingley has been asking about you,” Jane said. “She seemed very interested in your opinion on the regimental ball.”

“Oh, yes... I had forgotten Miss Bingley.”

It was a lie, of course, she had not forgotten the viper in a silk dress that inhabited Netherfield Park. How *could* one forget her.

“Perhaps you will be able to speak to Mr. Darcy,” Jane said encouragingly.

“Perhaps.”

The thought was somewhat heartening, but Elizabeth did not know what she might say to him.

The rain continued unabated, unusually torrential for November... and though Mrs. Bennet bemoaned the continual use of the carriage, there was no other option for Jane's travel to and from Netherfield Park. And there would be no talk of stopping such visits, for Mrs. Bennet was certain that with every visit, the chance of a marriage proposal grew more and more certain.

Jane seemed to be in no hurry to acquire such a thing, and her affection for Mr. Bingley seemed only to grow with each passing week.

Now, so close to December, with the weather becoming increasingly more foul, Elizabeth found herself dreading the onset of winter and the snow that her father's almanac had promised.

Tea at Netherfield Park was always initiated by Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst, but it was obvious to Elizabeth that the invitations were spurred by another party—namely, Mr. Bingley. But such an invitation could not come from him, though he always greeted them at the door, and attended each tea time or luncheon with a smile upon his face and ready conversation.

On that particular day, however, he and Jane were deep in conversation at one of the high windows while Elizabeth was seated with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst.

"How fares your sister, Miss Lydia," Caroline asked.

"She is quite well," Elizabeth said. "Though she has refused to leave her bed until Mr. Wickham comes to call upon her."

Mrs. Hurst laughed lightly. "She may be abed for several weeks," she said as she sipped her tea. "Mr. Wickham has departed Meryton."

"And may he never darken this place with his presence again," Caroline said vehemently.

“Whatever has he done?” Elizabeth asked. “I am still in confusion over what has happened!”

“It is quite shocking,” Caroline said quietly. “And I confess, I have never known Mr. Darcy raise his fists to anyone in the entirety of our acquaintance.”

“But if you knew, you would understand the reason,” Louisa said gravely.

Elizabeth’s patience was growing thin. “I do hope that you will tell me what it is.”

Caroline sighed heavily. “Some years ago—”

“Four years,” Louisa interrupted. “Four years ago, when Mr. Darcy’s dear sister was only sixteen... Mr. Wickham attempted to... Well, he attempted to force sweet Georgiana into an engagement... and then a marriage! All without her brother’s knowledge!”

“He met her in Brighton, and then attempted to flee the city with her so that they could be married at Gretna Green.”

Elizabeth’s throat tightened. “Without his knowledge?”

“Their father had been dead for some years, and Mr. Darcy is the head of the family. If they had truly been in love, Mr. Wickham would have needed his permission for such a thing. But Georgiana was so young, and he so dashing and persuasive— It was a scandal...”

“Very *nearly* a scandal,” Louisa corrected her. “But Mr. Darcy was given warning by an innkeeper’s wife who was suspicious of Mr. Wickham and he rescued Georgiana from his grip before anything untoward could occur...”

“Very fortunate,” Caroline said.

“Fortunate, indeed,” Elizabeth repeated. To say that she was at a loss for words was an exaggeration. Mr. Darcy had every reason to be angry with Mr. Wickham. And to know that they had been raised together... such a betrayal was beyond forgiveness.

“To make matters all the worse, Mr. Darcy agreed to pay Mr. Wickham’s considerable debts and give him a purse of money to begin a new career... He did not expect that Mr. Wickham would

take up a commission—or that he would not have given up his drinking and gambling as Mr. Darcy’s father had wished.”

“I see,” Elizabeth murmured. She wished that she had heard all of this from Mr. Darcy himself... She wanted, very much, to comfort him and tell him how sorry she was that Mr. Wickham had done this to his sister, and to their family.

“And where is Mr. Darcy? I have not seen him in Meryton—”

Louisa smiled and sipped her tea as Caroline laughed.

“Mr. Darcy has been absent for several days now,” she said. “He went to the regiment to speak to Colonel Forster, and we have not seen him since. Charles may know where he has gone, but he will not say.”

“Perhaps he has gone to America to wed his savage darling,” Caroline said with a sly smile.

“Has he been writing to her again?” Louisa asked. “How lovely, they would make an excellent match.” She turned to Elizabeth. “You would not believe their estate... fields of tobacco. As far as the eye can see. Very lucrative. Very expensive. She will be a very wealthy woman when her father passes away, and her husband the master of a large plantation.”

“I see.”

Elizabeth’s confusion over her feelings for Mr. Darcy and the events of the last few days swirled through her mind and tightened her chest.

She rose from her seat and pressed her hands together to try and keep some measure of calm, but for some reason she knew that she could not sit in the company of these women for any length of time without feeling the urge to scream.

“Miss Eliza, are you quite all right?”

“Fine,” she replied shortly. The hatred of that nickname was eclipsed by the need to depart their company. “I believe I must take some air,” she said. “I am feeling somewhat... lightheaded.”

“By all means,” Louisa said, but Elizabeth caught the flash of Caroline’s catlike smile and her chest tightened all the more as she

knew that Caroline was celebrating the effect her words had had.

Elizabeth wished that she could avoid giving her the satisfaction of such a thing, but she could bear it no longer.

“Thank you,” she said and walked quickly from the room.

“Lizzy? Are you quite all right?”

Jane’s question floated down the corridor after her, but Elizabeth did not break her stride.

She opened the front door, stepped out into the courtyard, and closed her eyes. The door creaked closed behind her and Elizabeth took a deep, shaking breath of the cold afternoon air.

Calm. She needed to be calm.

Why was she so concerned with what Mr. Darcy did, or whom he married? He had made no overtures of affection or marriage to her... so what did it matter? He could marry whomever he liked and she should have nothing to say about it. She was an entirely inappropriate bride for such a man. She was not wealthy, had no land or titles to promise him, and even her meager estate would be whittled away in the twilight years of her father’s life, and then even it would pass from her hands and into Mr. Collins’ possession.

She had nothing but her wits to recommend her. That had seemed like enough when she was younger. But now that strident refusal to focus on her accomplishments seemed foolhardy...

She knew very well that she was not the sort of woman who would ever be made into an ornament to be trotted out at dinner parties to perform like a caged bird, but the thought that she had been too stubborn in her endeavors was one that had plagued her all the more in recent months.

Elizabeth knew that she should go back into the parlor and continue to drink her tea and pretend that Caroline Bingley’s words did not affect her so strongly. But as she looked over her shoulder at the house, she could not best the thought of it.

The clouds overhead were threatening, but Elizabeth was determined. She pulled her shawl around her shoulders and started walking. Her bonnet and gloves lay upon a chair in the parlor, but

she could not go back for them. Not now.

At a steady pace, Elizabeth walked down the road that would take her back to Longbourn. If the fields had not been so wet and muddy, she could have taken a shorter route, but the rain had been torrential and unceasing in recent weeks, and many of the fields were saturated with water and some were flooded with great brown lakes of standing water.

She trudged along the road and tried her best to stay out of the worst of the mud, but it was unavoidable. As she walked she sorted through the confusion of her thoughts. If Mr. Darcy were able to tell her, in his own words, what had passed between himself and Mr. Wickham, perhaps she might understand his reasoning for the fight at the regimental ball.

Or perhaps she would ask him, again, about the woman from America. If he did plan to marry her, she would want to know. Yes... she would want to know the truth, not some half-truth of a story from Caroline Bingley that she could not trust.

Overhead, the clouds darkened, and Elizabeth quickened her pace. The walk from Longbourn to Netherfield Park only seemed short when the weather was fine, but the moment it started to rain, it seemed like the longest walk she had ever taken.

The rain began slowly, and then increased steadily until it became a downpour. Elizabeth was soaked through in minutes, and had nowhere to shelter from the sudden storm. She pulled her shawl over her head and trudged on through the mud until it became clear that her sodden shawl was doing more harm than good. Utterly dejected, and overwhelmed by her feelings, Elizabeth finally allowed herself to give in to her emotions.

Her eyes filled with tears and fell down her cheeks to mingle with the rain as thunder rolled overhead.

“Miss Elizabeth!”

She turned, shocked, as a gentleman on horseback rode toward her. She had not seen him over the rise in the road, and the thunder had masked the horse’s hoofbeats. The mare was streaked

in mud, and the gentleman's coat was soaked with it. Under the brim of his hat, the gentleman's expression was troubled and his eyes were full of concern.

"Mr. Darcy," she stammered. "I— I did not think—"

"We must get you out of the storm. Come, I will take you back to Netherfield..."

She stood her ground. "No, I am walking home to Longbourn." There was nothing in the world that could make her return to Netherfield Park. Especially to face the not-so-quiet ridicule of Caroline Bingley, or Jane's wide-eyed and well-intentioned sympathies, for the manner of her departure.

"You are mad," he cried. "The storm is just about to break, I will take you to Longbourn, but you must come at once."

He jumped down from the saddle and extended his hand to her.

Elizabeth paused, her hand hovered just above his. "Caroline told me what happened to your sister," she blurted out. "How Mr. Wickham tricked her..."

Mr. Darcy's eyes widened slightly, and then his gaze hardened. "He did. Most cruelly. It was meant to wound me, and to secure a legacy for himself that he felt he deserved. Should anything happen to me, Georgiana will inherit Pemberley. It was too great a prize for Mr. Wickham to allow to pass him by."

This explained a great deal, and confirmed what Caroline had said over tea. But it did not explain everything. "But why did you fight with him at the regimental ball? In front of everyone?"

The cut on his cheek had almost healed, but it gave his handsome face and almost dangerous air. "I should not have allowed my feelings to overtake me in such a manner," he said with some chagrin. "But to see Mr. Wickham, unrepentant, with the same smugness in his face as on the day he was turned away from Pemberley... I could not bear it. I sought to protect your sister as I should have protected mine."

"Lydia!"

He nodded briefly. "When I spoke to Colonel Forster he confirmed my fears, that Mr. Wickham had been searching for a young woman of a good family... he would have inserted himself into your lives, ingratiated himself, and then stolen away with Lydia. I have no doubt of it."

Elizabeth was stunned into silence. The rain pelted down, soaking them both, and her shoes sank deeper into the mud; but Elizabeth could not feel the cold, only a strange warmth in her chest that she could not explain. Her mind whirled with questions and confusion, and she felt frozen in place.

"I— I confess I do not know what to say..." she managed.

He extended his hand toward her once more. "Miss Elizabeth, please allow me to take you home to Longbourn."

December ~ 1816

“Oh, Lizzy. I am beginning to wonder if you are too

stubborn to find any real happiness. If only you had stood in the rain with Mr. Darcy a little longer,” Mrs. Bennet lamented for the seventh time. “Perhaps you would now be close to an engagement.”

“Mama—” Jane began to defend her sister but Elizabeth shook her head. There was no point in arguing or reasoning with their mother. Once she had made up her mind, there was no convincing her of anything else. Even if it was the truth.

“If you had fallen ill, the gentleman would have had no choice but to visit you to enquire after your health, and then he would speak to Mr. Bennet, who would demand his apology for endangering your life in such a manner—”

“Mama, really,” Jane tried again. Elizabeth rolled her eyes toward the parlor ceiling and took a deep breath. This one-sided lamentation could continue for hours unabated, and any interruption only lengthened its duration.

“Will no one think of the future of this family?” Mrs. Bennet moaned. “Charlotte Lucas is clamoring for the keys to my house, and my own dear daughters will not have a care for their poor mama’s twilight years... I had thought Lydia to have finally found a gentleman she could endure for longer than a few hours, but Mr. Wickham seems to have disappeared from Meryton without even a

farewell or any politeness at all! Poor Lydia was beside herself with grief!”

All at once, Elizabeth could bear it no longer. “Mama. You must stop this at once.”

Mrs. Bennet blinked at her in surprise. Her mother’s tirades were so often ignored, that she always seemed shocked to be interrupted.

“Mr. Wickham was sent away from the regiment in disgrace. He was of no quality to be paying any kind of suit or attention to Lydia. If you knew the truth about him, you would not be so eager to welcome him into our home.”

“Lizzy,” Jane whispered. “What are you doing?”

But Elizabeth would not be stopped. “And to lament that I did not fall ill—as though I had retained my health on purpose to spite this family and thereby trick Mr. Darcy into some kind of affection? I could not imagine ever taking part in such a scheme, willingly or unwillingly as the case might have been. How could you be so cavalier with your daughter’s well-being to say such things? Had Jane fallen ill, would you have used her illness to advance your hopes that Mr. Bingley might propose sooner?”

Mrs. Bennet shifted uncomfortably in her chair and Jane looked down at her hands. Their mother would have done anything in her power to speed along that much desired proposal. But at what cost? If anything, Elizabeth’s waning respect for her mother had been eroded all the more.

“Are you finished?” Mrs. Bennet said coldly.

Elizabeth met her mother’s stare with unflinching steadiness. “I am.”

“You are a selfish girl, Lizzy, I have always said so. If it were not for your stubbornness, we could have avoided all of this pain and heartache years ago when Mr. Collins first arrived in Meryton and made clear his intentions to win your affections.”

“Mama, please do not,” Jane said. “This was meant to be a happy day. Mr. Bingley has decided to stay in Hertfordshire

through Christmastide..." She held up the elegant invitation that had arrived only a few hours earlier. "Could we not speak of happy things instead of the past?"

Mrs. Bennet smiled and reached for the invitation, which Jane handed over with some measure of relief.

"Of course, Jane. This ball is precisely the opportunity we have been waiting for. Mr. Bingley will be sure to propose."

"I do hope so," Jane replied. "Caroline and Louisa have said as much... Though I cannot be certain of their sincerity when they express their happiness at staying on at Netherfield Park. I know that Caroline wished, very loudly, to return to London for the holiday season."

"A pity, indeed," Mrs. Bennet said. "They have not yet experienced a Christmas in Hertfordshire, and I daresay once they do, they will not want to leave!"

Elizabeth frowned briefly but said nothing. Her mother had not experienced a Christmas outside Hertfordshire since she was a girl, save for one year where the whole family journeyed to London to stay with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. But she had been a miserable guest, and seemed to have gone out of her way not to enjoy the holiday. As far as Elizabeth was concerned, her mother could not be considered an authority on such things.

"Lizzy may even be able to renew her acquaintance with Mr. Darcy," Mrs. Bennet exclaimed.

Though her mother had not been speaking to her, Elizabeth felt compelled to answer. "I do not think so, Mama. Mr. Darcy had plans to leave for America. I daresay he has already departed for London."

Mrs. Bennet's shoulders slumped and she sighed heavily. "You have missed your chance, Lizzy," she said as she handed the invitation back to Jane.

"Indeed, it seems I have," she murmured.

Elizabeth had spent the weeks since her last meeting with Mr. Darcy considering everything he had said and done during their

acquaintance, searching for some sign of affection in him. His defense of Lydia, surely, could have had a deeper purpose to it... And their conversations at Rosings Park—he had gone out of his way to make time to speak to her and walk with her. She thought of him often, but did he feel anything for her? Did he think of her? Or were his thoughts focused upon his interests abroad... Caroline's repeated mention of the tobacco heiress pierced Elizabeth's thoughts like a needle. The gentleman would have far more alluring prospects pushed in his path at every turn. Young women of fortune and breeding which far surpassed hers.

She looked down at her tea and set the cup upon the table beside her chair.

"I do not think I will be attending Mr. Bingley's ball," she said suddenly.

Her mother's shocked gasp sounded far too loud in the quiet room. "Lizzy! How can you think to stay home on a night such as this? Even Mr. Bennet will be in attendance! It is a very important evening for Jane, can you really be so selfish as to refuse to come?"

Jane smiled gently. "You do not have to come if you do not wish it," she said.

Mrs. Bennet huffed angrily. "All of Meryton will be there, it will look ill upon the family if you are the only Bennet to stay away. Mary and her dear Nicholas are coming from London. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner will be here..."

"The whole family," Jane said. "But, Mama, if Lizzy does not want to come, she should not have to. I would not wish for anyone to force me to attend any event where I would be unhappy to be there."

Elizabeth laid her hand upon Jane's and smiled. "I would not be unhappy," she said. "Mama is quite correct. This evening is important for you, and I would not miss such a thing for all the world."

Lydia's enthusiasm for the Netherfield Christmas ball was unequal to anything Elizabeth had ever seen. Her youngest sister was always excited to attend events where she might dance and speak to handsome officers and gentlemen, but on this occasion, her excitement had a different facet.

Mr. Bingley had specifically asked for Lydia's assistance in selecting the musicians for the evening, and Lydia had thrown herself into the task with great relish.

"They will play all of my favorite dances," Lydia declared. "And Mr. Bingley has been very generous with his purse, and the very best musicians, the ones who played at Lady Lucas' spring dance, have been engaged for the evening."

"How wonderful," Mrs. Bennet said with a smile. She was pleased to see Lydia's attention focused elsewhere, and Elizabeth could not help but wonder what her mother was thinking. She seemed very supportive of Lydia's involvement in the planning of Mr. Bingley's ball, and there could only be one reason for such a thing.

"Mr. Galliard seemed very impressed by my dancing," Lydia continued. "He complimented the quickness of my steps on several occasions."

There, Elizabeth thought. There was the reason.

"He is one of the most sought after musicians in London," Lydia said. Her smile was bright and genuine, and Elizabeth could almost hear her mother's thoughts turning in her mind.

"And unmarried?" Elizabeth said.

"Lizzy! What a question," Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. "Of course he is unmarried. A young man of excellent talent, and an income comparable to a fine gentleman..."

"He has two houses in London," Lydia said excitedly. "Though he is so rarely at home due to all of the engagements and parties he plays. What an exciting life he must lead!"

“Exciting, indeed,” Elizabeth murmured. She could think of no better match for her sister, though such a thing had never occurred to her before. Lydia needed a husband who understood her, but perhaps a musician would be a good match for her personality as well as her need to always be on the move.

In the rush of preparation for the ball, Elizabeth had been left in charge of the decorations for Longbourn’s holiday festivities and she found that she had very little time to concern herself with the ball.

Jane had been granted permission to have a new gown made, and though she had assisted in the choice of fabric and trimmings, Elizabeth had not taken much notice of anything else.

Pine boughs trimmed with apples and gold-painted leaves adorned the mantle of every fireplace in the house, and she had taken great care to arrange candles, holly sprigs from the tree at the edge of the garden, and sweet-smelling bundles of herbs wherever she could.

Kitty’s children had assisted her with the construction of paper chains that were now draped around the parlor walls, and in the days leading up to the ball, she had been hard at work in secret fashioning a crown of ribbon roses for Jane’s hair as a surprise gift for her special evening.

“Now, Lizzy, what will you wear?” Mrs. Bennet asked brightly. “Lydia has finally decided upon her gown, and Jane’s will be ready to collect from the dressmaker in a few days’ time.”

Elizabeth looked up from her sewing in surprise. “I— I had not decided yet.”

Mrs. Bennet set down her teacup and stared at her daughter. “Lizzy! I am shocked at your lack of preparation for this event!”

Elizabeth looked around the room at the greenery and decorations she had hung in the parlor and then at Lydia’s dress in her lap. Sharp retorts sprang to mind, but she pressed her lips together and took a breath to keep herself from speaking them.

"I do hope that you will make a decision soon," Mrs. Bennet huffed. "I will not have you coming to Mr. Bingley's first Hertfordshire ball in a grim day dress as Mary used to."

"Mama, that is unkind," Jane said from the other side of the parlor. She was working on an elaborate piece of embroidery for the sash of her new gown and Elizabeth envied the neatness of her stitches for the thousandth time that week.

"Mary does not dress in such a manner now, of course," Mrs. Bennet continued as though Jane had not admonished her, "and I hold Mr. Lark entirely responsible for the change we have seen in her demeanor."

Elizabeth looked down at her stitching once more. Of course, Mary's husband was responsible for Mary's sudden change in demeanor. He understood her, or seemed to, and Elizabeth had never seen Mary so content, or happy.

Marriage was not a pleasant union for every couple, but Mary seemed to have found her own version of happiness, and Elizabeth could not have asked for a better outcome for her formerly stoic sister.

"So, will you make a decision now?" Mrs. Bennet demanded.

"Now?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes! Go upstairs now, and choose a dress. You shall not be welcome back into this parlor until you have done so!"

Lydia laughed and snatched another mince tart from the tea tray. "And do not choose the green one," she said. "It looks very well in the daylight, but under candlelight it is most unflattering. And Miss Bingley has told me that there will be *hundreds* of candles in the ballroom at Netherfield Park."

The pale pink dress that Lydia had chosen would look very well in candlelight, and Elizabeth knew that it had been chosen very specifically to flatter her. Mrs. Bennet had been instrumental in its choice, and the alterations that had been done to the bodice and sleeves. Lydia would be dancing all night, and thus, would be under the eye of the musicians—and Mr. Galliard.

Elizabeth sighed heavily and put Lydia's gown aside.

The parlor was the warmest room in the house, and she did not relish the idea of leaving it, or being barred from it for something so petty, but her mother would not be moved. Elizabeth did not see the sense in remaining upstairs in her bedchamber until supper out of spite. It would benefit nothing, and she would never hear the end of it until she had made a choice.

"Thank you, Lizzy," her mother said. "See that you do not labor over the choice for too long... And nothing ivory, Jane's dress is ivory, and I do not want you to be in competition..."

"Of course, Mama," Elizabeth muttered.

No green, no ivory... that left her with precious little choice from her wardrobe.

With her shawl wrapped tightly around her shoulders, Elizabeth left the parlor and climbed the stairs to her bedchamber with heavy steps. She truly did not see the benefit in her attendance at Mr. Bingley's ball. She would not be able to avoid Caroline Bingley or Mrs. Hurst, Charlotte would want to discuss her upcoming wedding to Mr. Collins, and she felt that she could not bear to watch the happiness of her sisters in such close proximity.

Longbourn would be filled to the brim for Christmastide. Those that were coming from London for the ball would be staying on to celebrate the holiday with them, and she could already imagine just how loud it would be with all of the children running through the corridors.

Elizabeth loved her family, but sometimes she wished for solitude. Especially as she, herself, was not feeling particularly merry.

It would have been irresponsible to put the blame for her mood upon Mr. Darcy, but she could not deny that she had been thinking of him more often than was entirely necessary.

She entered her bedchamber and opened the wardrobe where her dresses were kept.

Elizabeth pulled out all of her gowns and laid them upon her

bed. The white was old, too old to re-hem and pretend that it was new. The green, her favorite, was, indeed, inappropriate for a candlelit affair. It was better suited to Lady Lucas' summer afternoon salons... She could not wear pink, for then Lydia would complain.

"What about blue?" Jane asked from the doorway. Elizabeth looked up at her sister in surprise. "I thought you might be in need of assistance," she said with a smile.

Elizabeth sighed gratefully. "I am, indeed."

"What choices have you made?" Jane asked as she entered the room.

"I cannot decide between the gown I wore to the regimental ball, or the blue I have not worn since last Christmas... and Mama chose that for me as well."

Jane leaned against her sister briefly and frowned at the gowns that had been laid out on the bed.

"What about one of mine?" she asked.

"I could not—"

Jane, however, did not listen. She went to the wardrobe and pulled three of her own gowns from the shelves and laid them upon her bed. "Come and look. These could be very easily altered for you. I will not miss them, and you are in dire need of some new dresses. You shall have to speak to Papa about it, or I shall be forced to. You have neglected your own needs for far too long, Lizzy. Lydia somehow manages to acquire a new gown every year, sometimes two!"

Elizabeth walked over to her sister's side of the room and looked down at the gowns Jane had chosen. Each one was beautiful, and she remembered each occasion her sister had worn them.

"I think this one," Jane said. She pointed at a gown with a flattering neckline and sleeves that would compliment the line of Elizabeth's shoulders without making her look too small.

"The bustline will have to be taken in," Elizabeth muttered.

“And the hem shortened,” Jane countered and Elizabeth smiled at her sister’s sly tone. They teased each other often enough about how different they were. Elizabeth favored her father’s side of the family, with dark hair and hazel eyes, while Jane was tall and willowy, with their mother’s fair hair and blue eyes.

“A good deal shorter,” Elizabeth laughed.

“Then have we decided?” Jane asked.

“Quite easily,” Elizabeth replied. “And I promise that I shall speak to Papa about a new gown... it has, truly, been quite some time since I had one made.”

“Far too long.”

They worked together to fold and put the dresses back into the wardrobe before Jane retrieved her ribbon box from beneath her bed and they returned to the parlor together.

“Do not fret, Mama,” Jane said as they re-entered the warmth of the room. “Lizzy has chosen a gown that will not be an embarrassment to us all.”

“I am delighted to hear it,” Mrs. Bennet huffed. “Perhaps next time I shall not have to resort to threats to have your cooperation.”

“Perhaps,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

The arrival of Mary and Mr. Lark heralded the beginning of the Bennet’s Christmastide celebrations. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner’s carriage arrived only a few hours later, and with the house full of guests, Elizabeth finally began to feel some of her strange mood lift away.

She had spent too much time thinking of late, and it felt strange to dwell upon something that was so far beyond her control. What Mr. Darcy did with his life was not her concern—but while she knew that she should move her thoughts to other things, she could

not push him away entirely.

The distraction of family was a welcome one, and Elizabeth busied herself with their guests, and catching up with the gossip that Mrs. Gardiner had brought with her from London.

Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner disappeared to talk business, and Kitty and Mary's husbands did their best to join in the festivities. Kitty's children were as rambunctious as ever and the days before the Netherfield Ball passed quickly.

When the day of the ball, Elizabeth awoke to a strange light filtering through her bedchamber window. Jane's bed was empty, and Elizabeth guessed that she had already risen and gone downstairs to see to Kitty and the children. She lay in bed for a moment with the blankets pulled up under her chin and tried to prepare herself for the shock of the cold floor under feet.

She sat up and rubbed her hands over her face before pushing back the blankets. Despite her attempt to steel herself to it, she winced as she set her feet upon the hardwood floor and stood. The reminder to complete the braided rug that she had intended to place beside her bed loomed in her mind once more... it had sat in her sewing basket for months, always forgotten when some other project demanded her attention.

When she pulled back the curtain to look at the weather, the remnants of her sleep were shaken away as she realized—

“Snow! Lizzy! Did you see?”

Lydia rushed into the room and threw her arms around her sister's waist, knocking her off balance.

Elizabeth laughed and struggled to stay upright. Lydia had never lost her childish excitement for winter, and the first snowfall of the year always put her in a joyful mood.

“Papa will be pleased to see that his almanac was correct again this year,” Elizabeth said.

“Papa is always pleased when he is able to show mama that it is not nonsense.”

"It happens every year," Elizabeth sighed. "And yet she will persist."

"Of course," Lydia laughed. "Will you come down to breakfast? Although, I may be too excited to eat. We are going to Netherfield Park tonight! Papa has already ordered the carriage."

"It is very exciting, indeed," Elizabeth said. She did not share her sister's enthusiasm, but Lydia would not notice.

"I believe I shall ask Mr. Galliard to dance," she said gleefully as she released her hold on Elizabeth's waist and spun toward the door.

"But he is the leader of the musicians," Elizabeth laughed. How will he step away to dance with you?"

"He promised me that he would," Lydia said confidently. "And I shall hold him to it!"

Elizabeth smiled and pushed her sister out of the room. "We shall have to wait and see," she said. "But I do hope that he is able to do so."

"As do I!" Lydia pulled the door closed behind her, and Elizabeth listened to the sound of her footsteps as she ran down the stairs to the main floor, shouting about the snow as she went. In some ways, Lydia would always be sixteen.

She laid out the gown that Jane had helped her to hem and alter. It fit her perfectly, and the pale blue velvet ribbon they had chosen to accent the blue of the dress would look well in her dark hair.

In a few hours, they would have to begin the preparations for their departure. Thankfully, she would only be expected to stay at the ball until Mr. Bingley had made his proposal. Afterward, no one would notice if she stole away and returned to Longbourn. That was her plan. Her mother would be too distracted to argue, and her father would not mind that she had decided to leave, either. Kitty and Mary would be distracted by their own husbands, and Lydia would be upon the dance floor all night. No one would notice her absence, and she would be free to return home and have

a few quiet hours in the house before everyone returned and the celebrations continued.

A perfect plan.

L Lydia had been talking of the decorations and plans for the ball for weeks. She had been working closely with Mrs. Hurst on the order of music and the dances that would be played, and she had seen first hand all of Caroline Bingley's planning for Netherfield Park's ballroom.

Long velvet curtains had been ordered from London, and Lydia was certain that several large pine trees had been felled on the grounds of Netherfield Park to provide for the decor.

Elizabeth had not been certain which parts of Lydia's wild assumptions could be believed, but nothing could have prepared her for the grandeur of the actual decor that Caroline Bingley had procured for the evening's event.

The snow was still falling as their carriages departed Longbourn, and Lydia chattered unceasingly of the plans for the music and the food that Mrs. Hurst had ordered for the evening.

The carriage ride seemed blissfully short, and upon their arrival, Lydia leapt from the carriage and half-ran to the open door and waited for the rest of the family on impatient feet while other guests milled around her and filtered slowly into the house.

"Do hurry," she called out from the stairs and Elizabeth could only chuckle as her family struggled through the snow and finally made their way up the stairs to where Lydia waited for them. Lydia seemed not to notice Mary's angry glare, or Mrs. Gardiner's frown as they passed her, she was far too excited to worry about such

things. And as soon as the music began, she would forget all else but the dance, and the partner who would stand before her.

Netherfield Park's large foyer had been draped in red velvet curtains which covered all of the walls, and every corner had been hung with bouquets of trailing ivy and holly branches covered in bright red berries that matched the color of the velvet.

"How daring," Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. "I had thought to do the very same at Longbourn, but our ceiling is too short, and it should make the rooms look so much smaller... Perhaps I shall try it next year to be certain..."

Elizabeth bit down on her cheek to keep from saying anything, but Mrs. Gardiner murmured her agreement as they passed into the ballroom, and Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat as she took in the room. Netherfield Park's ballroom was already large by any standard, but the decor had turned the imposing space into a welcoming and surprisingly intimate one.

Velvet curtains had been hung from the ceiling to change the shape of the room, and the pine boughs that Lydia had spoken of were fashioned into wreaths of varying sizes and hung with gold-painted apples and berries and draped with bright ribbons.

The room was filled with beeswax candles of every size available, and the sweet smell mingled delicately with the freshness of the pine and sharp tang of oranges and spices. It was delightful in every way possible, while reminding every guest of just how expensive everything in the room had been to acquire. A show of wealth and influence just as surely as it was a celebration of the season and the community.

"How wonderful," Jane breathed.

"There is Miss Bingley," Lydia cried. "I must congratulate her." But Lydia was looking for the musicians, who had not yet taken up their places upon the raised platform that had been erected at one side of the ballroom.

Mrs. Bennet waved her daughter away and turned her own attention to locating Lady Lucas and the rest of her friends. Jane

clung to Elizabeth's arm, but she was looking for Mr. Bingley.

"There he is, Jane," Elizabeth whispered as the gentleman's handsome face appeared in the crowd.

"Will you wait with me?" she asked. There was a nervous quaver to her voice and Elizabeth squeezed her sister's hand tightly as Mr. Bingley saw them and turned in their direction.

"Of course."

The musicians began to take their places and Elizabeth heard Lydia's bright laughter over the noise of conversation. Trust Lydia to be the first to the dance floor.

Mr. Bingley dodged around a young couple who were bound for the dance floor and bowed to them. "Miss Jane, Miss Elizabeth, it is so good of you to come this evening."

"We would not miss this event for all the world," Elizabeth said. "And how splendid the ballroom has become! You must allow Miss Bingley to decorate in this manner all year 'round!"

Mr. Bingley laughed and then grimaced playfully. "She would see us into the poorhouse with such extravagance. But I could not deny her when I know what results might be achieved. And I cannot argue when it is Christmastide."

"It is certainly a sight to behold," Jane said with a smile. Her cheeks were pink as Mr. Bingley turned his attention to her.

"Miss Elizabeth, might I trouble you to release your sister into my care? I should like to speak with her."

He spoke to Elizabeth, but his gaze remained on Jane as he did so, and Elizabeth pulled her arm gently from her sister's grasp.

"Of course," she said with a smile.

Jane glanced at Elizabeth before placing her hand upon Mr. Bingley's proffered elbow.

"Will you be all right?" she asked as they turned toward the dance floor. Elizabeth waved her sister's concerns away.

"I shall be very well, indeed," she said. "I have found the punch table."

Jane laughed and turned back to Mr. Bingley, who pointed out

several of the decor choices as they moved away from her and stepped into the crowd.

The ball was well attended, which should not have been a surprise. Mr. Bingley was wealthy, and influential, and it would be rude to refuse an invitation from such a gentleman. Especially one so pleasant as Mr. Bingley.

Charlotte Lucas stood near one of the banquet tables, and Elizabeth was about to approach her, when she recognized the stance of the gentleman who stood to her left. Mr. Collins. Had he really come from Hundford to spend Christmas with the Lucas family? Surely, Lady Catherine would not have been willing to spare him at such an important time of year. She was curious, but not curious enough to ask— Their position also blocked the punch table, and Elizabeth did not think that she could acquire a glass of punch without speaking to them... pretending that she did not see Mr. Collins was easy, but she could not ignore Charlotte.

The musicians began to play, and Elizabeth watched as Lydia dragged her chosen partner onto the dance floor and took a position closest to the musicians' platform. No doubt to put her in the eyeline of Mr. Gannett, who smiled down at her with genuine affection in his expression.

Perhaps she had been correct, perhaps Lydia could be happy with a gentleman such as him.

She would have to speak to him properly before the end of the evening, that much was certain.

Elizabeth had expected to see Jane and Mr. Bingley upon the dance floor, but they had disappeared from sight. She spent several moments trying to locate them in the crowd, but to no avail.

Caroline Bingley caught her eye once, and Elizabeth had smiled in response, but Caroline did not give any indication that she had seen Elizabeth in return.

No matter, Elizabeth thought. Soon enough Caroline Bingley would not be able to avoid speaking to her. They would all be sisters as soon as Jane and Mr. Bingley were married, and Caroline

would have to manage their new affinity just as Elizabeth would. Perhaps they would be able to come to some kind of mutual truce. It seemed a foolish thought, but there was no possible way to continue their current animosity—and she could not do such a thing to Jane.

Elizabeth's mother stood with Lady Lucas and a small knot of her friends, and their voices carried through the ballroom clearly enough that Elizabeth knew she should disappear from sight sooner than later, lest she become a topic of conversation. The stubborn daughter who would not acknowledge that her own actions were hampering her chances of finding a suitable husband.

Kitty and Mr. Andrews were also on the dance floor. Kitty might have been married, but she had lost none of her enjoyment of frivolities such as this.

Mr. Lark was deep in conversation with Mr. Gardiner while Mary and Mrs. Gardiner stood nearby. Mary touched her husband's arm every so often, and he would look back to her and smile and Elizabeth wondered if it might be Mary with a pregnancy announcement before the new year instead of Kitty... So many happiness' waiting to break through, but there was nothing for her.

Elizabeth felt a sudden weight upon her shoulders and she felt far too warm. As though all of the velvet in the room had suddenly increased the temperature. She knew Netherfield Park well enough that she could find somewhere to be alone. She needed a breath of fresh air... Anything to remove herself from all of the noise and conversation. All of the smiles and well-wishes.

She wound through the crowd and wished that she had been bold enough to fetch herself a glass of punch, but that would mean speaking to Charlotte and Mr. Collins, and she was not quite prepared for such an investment... not yet.

As Elizabeth reached the far side of the ballroom, she pulled aside one of the velvet drapings to reveal a door that would lead out of the ballroom. She pushed it open and stepped through into the quiet of the corridor.

The corridor was lit only by a few small lamps, and she walked with quick steps toward the conservatory. A library would have been her first choice, but they were all located in rooms that were closer to the ballroom, and she did not wish to be discovered.

Elizabeth heard voices and pressed herself against the wall as the couple passed. She recognized Jane's soft laughter, and Mr. Bingley's fair curls, but she said nothing.

"We shall announce it to the guests all at once," he said. "You have made me the happiest man in all of England, perhaps even the world."

"And I the happiest woman," Jane said. Elizabeth could hear the joy in her sister's voice, and her heart swelled to know that the proposal had, indeed, happened as they had all wished. They would go now to announce it to all of the guests... but she had known of it first.

That was all Elizabeth needed. She could congratulate her sister in person and apologize for her absence later...

Tears pricked at her eyelashes and she blinked them away as a door opened and light and noise spilled into the corridor as Jane and Mr. Bingley returned to the ballroom.

She resumed her pace and turned a corner before darting through a doorway that opened into the conservatory.

The room was quiet, and Elizabeth could feel a change in the temperature almost immediately. The flowers and plants in the glass-walled enclosure were spoiled by the sunlight the room enjoyed, while being protected from the harshness of the elements.

But Elizabeth did not want to be warm. She wanted to feel the cold air on her hot cheeks and try to push aside some of the resentment that clawed at her heart on this happiest of days in what should have been the most joyful of seasons.

Netherfield Park's rose gardens lay just outside the door, and Elizabeth pushed it open carefully, mindful of any noise that the hinges made in the quiet room.

The cold air hit her face and she took a quick breath before stepping out onto the snow-covered steps.

The clouds overhead had been swept away by the wind and stars twinkled down at her from the velvet black sky. She closed her eyes briefly and entertained the idea of making a wish upon one of those bright winter stars... A foolish notion that such a thing could come true. But she did anyway. A small wish. One just for her as opposed to all the ones she had made for her sisters in the past. They had their happiness, when would it be her turn?

She took a breath and then walked out into the garden.

Snow covered the skeletal shapes of the ancient rose bushes and she took some comfort on the silvered light of the moon that spilled over the garden and made strange shadows on the new fallen snow.

She did not mind that the hem of her gown dragged behind her, or that her toes were cold, the chill was invigorating and Elizabeth relished the opportunity to clear her mind. She turned to look back at the house and smiled at the light from a hundred candles and lamps that glowed in the windows.

She would return soon enough, and there would be punch and champagne to toast Jane and Mr. Bingley's happiness, and then she could return to Longbourn to be alone.

She was about to walk on when she spied another figure in the garden who was also looking back at the house.

Elizabeth blinked in surprise. "Mr. Darcy? Is that you?"

She felt as though she would know the set of the gentleman's shoulders anywhere, a fact that she had not been certain of until just that moment.

He turned toward her, startled by the sound of her voice in the quiet garden. "Miss Elizabeth?"

"It is," she replied. "I did not think to see you here tonight."

"Whyever not?"

He walked toward her through the snow and Elizabeth suddenly realized that she had not brought a shawl with her. "Are

you not cold?" he asked softly.

"No," she lied, but she was not ready to go back into the house or return to all the noise and brightness of the ballroom. "I had thought— That is to say, Miss Bingley seemed convinced that you had departed for America... to New York, I believe?"

He chuckled softly. "Clearly she was mistaken. What else does Miss Bingley believe I am doing at this moment?"

"She also believes that you are going to make an offer of marriage to a tobacco heiress from Virginia," Elizabeth said.

The gentleman seemed to consider her answer very carefully, but Elizabeth could see a smile hovering at the corner of his mouth, barely illuminated by the moonlight. "It seems that poor Miss Bingley is uninformed of many things," Mr. Darcy said after a moment.

"Indeed," Elizabeth agreed. How could she not agree? He was here in the garden, was he not? Not aboard a ship bound for New York, and not in the parlor of a great plantation house taking coffee with a beautiful heiress. He was in Hertfordshire, speaking to her in a snow-covered garden...

"Why are you not at the ball?" he asked.

"I would ask you the same question," she countered.

He smiled this time and Elizabeth's throat tightened just a little.

"I could not bear the crush of people, or the noise... I take it the announcement of their engagement has been made?"

Elizabeth nodded, somewhat stunned that he had left the ballroom for the same reasons as she. *Some* of the same reasons. "It has."

"I am sure you are very happy for her," he said.

"Of course," Elizabeth replied. "How could I not be?"

"It must be difficult to watch your sisters be married and leave the house... I could not imagine how lonely that must be."

Elizabeth had not considered that loneliness could be the reason for her disquiet, but perhaps it was. No, the gentleman was correct—but how could he know of such things...

“But you have not answered my question,” she said, determined to change the subject.

“Have I not?”

She smiled. “If you are not departed for New York, do you still plan to leave England?”

“I do,” he replied.

Elizabeth’s fingers twisted together. “And when will that be?”

The gentleman did not answer her for a moment and Elizabeth glanced up and was startled to see that he was staring at her.

“Perhaps I shall decide upon a date when my wife agrees to travel with me.”

Elizabeth blinked at him in surprise. “Your wife? But I was— I am sorry, I should offer my congratulations...”

“There is no need,” he said. “I am not yet married.”

Elizabeth’s confusion, and the cold, was beginning to overwhelm her and she bit her lip briefly to keep from making a face at the gentleman. “I do not understand.”

“Let us go inside,” Mr. Darcy said. “You are not dressed for the cold.”

She shook her head. There had already been too much delay and miscommunication between them. The gentleman smiled briefly and removed his coat. “May I?” he asked before sweeping it over her shoulders.

Elizabeth stiffened as its warmth settled around her and then she clutched the edges of his coat tightly. It smelled of leather and unexpectedly of lavender and she could not help but smile as she murmured her thanks.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” he continued, “it has taken me some time to come to the conclusion to which I now hold.”

“And what might that be?”

“That you, Elizabeth, not an American tobacco heiress, are the only woman to whom I would make an offer of marriage.”

Elizabeth was stunned by his words and he chuckled softly to see her shock written plainly upon her face.

“If you would refuse my proposal, I beg you to tell me now, and I will never speak on the subject again.”

“I—” She paused, unable to think of what to say.

“Perhaps we should return to the ball, and you might consider my question further,” he said.

Elizabeth nodded dumbly and allowed him to lead her back toward the conservatory door. They walked together in a companionable silence, but her mind whirled with questions and possibilities. Could this be the answer to all of her unspoken wishes made under countless stars...

Her affection for Mr. Darcy had waxed and waned in ways that she had never expected, but now, faced with the offer he had made, Elizabeth found that she could only make one decision.

She must take the chance that happiness did, indeed, lie within her reach.

Mr. Darcy turned the handle of the conservatory door and Elizabeth walked ahead of him into the warm darkness of the room.

“Mr. Darcy—”

He closed the door and turned to her expectantly. She pulled his coat from her shoulders and held it out to him. His fingers brushed over hers as he took the coat from her hand and she smiled briefly.

“Thank you for the coat... it was very kind of you.”

“It was my pleasure, Miss Elizabeth. I do hope that I have not —”

“No, indeed,” Elizabeth said. He moved past her to enter the corridor that led back to the ballroom, but Elizabeth stayed frozen in place.

“Are you quite well?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

He looked at her strangely.

“I believe I should like to visit New York in the spring,” she said suddenly. “I should not like to miss Jane’s wedding.”

A smile broke over the gentleman's face as he registered what she had said. "I have heard that New York in the spring is something to behold, indeed," he replied.

He extended his hand to her, and Elizabeth placed her fingers on his palm. He drew her gloved hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. She shivered and smiled as he stepped closer.

"May I reserve the next two dances, Miss Bennet?" he asked softly.

"You may, indeed, sir, but I shall have to ask my mother if you would like to take up more space on my dance card..."

He chuckled and bent his head to brush his lips against her cheek. It would have proper for Elizabeth to stay still, but at the last possible moment, she turned her head and their lips met. The kiss was brief, but sweetly chaste, and a thrill rushed through Elizabeth's chest. This was what she had been looking for, the spark that would light a flame...

She had always compromised her own happiness to chase the ghost of a love that she did not truly believe existed. But under the light of the winter stars, she believed she might have found something that could grow to be that love she had always searched for. Such a thing did not have to arrive in one's life tied with satin ribbon... it could arrive wrapped in paper, or be hidden until one was ready to find it.

As they walked down the corridor together, Elizabeth realized that after a life of stubborn refusals she was ready for a journey to find what she had been searching for her entire life.

It would be an adventure, and there would be uncertainty and doubt along the way, but with a gentleman such as Mr. Darcy by her side, perhaps it would not be in vain.

The End

Also from Sophia Grey

Upon a Winter's Star
A Missed Engagement
Unapologetically, Elizabeth
Officer Darcy
Elizabeth Abroad: France
Elizabeth Abroad: India
An Unexpected Joy
If I Were Mrs. Darcy...
Elizabeth's Deception

Meryton Mysteries

The Trouble with Lords
The Trouble with Officers